

Class shames, scares johns

L.A. AIMS TO CUT DEMAND FOR PROSTITUTION

By JOEL RUBIN
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LOS ANGELES - Early on an otherwise slow Saturday morning, 16 men drifted into the lobby of a police station in Los Angeles.

They had no crimes to report or friends to bail out of jail. A motley crew bound only by their search for sex, the strangers plastered themselves sheepishly against the back wall, their eyes cast down at the floor like so many awkward teenagers at a school dance.

A cop working the front desk took in the glum faces and smirked slightly.

Soon, the men were led down a hallway and into a room. Spanish speakers were told to take seats next to two translators.

"We've developed this program to help you," Bill Margolis, a retired Los Angeles Police Department detective, told the group. "If you listen to what these people say to you today - if you just stay awake and pay attention - I guarantee you'll be a better person at the end of it."

"And you don't get a second chance," added Art Ruditsky, the bad cop to Margolis' good one. "Get arrested again, and we'll see you in court."

This is john school, a new effort by law enforcement officials to stem prostitution in Los Angeles.

Built on the belief that a heavy dose of in-your-face shame and scare tactics can do more to dissuade men from looking to the streets for gratification than traditional punishment, the class - think traffic school with higher stakes - offers first-time offenders leniency in exchange for a promise that they will change their ways.

It is the latest example of how prosecutors and police around the country are rethinking their strategies in the age-old battle against prostitution.

"I've arrested hundreds of street walkers and busted countless tricks. ... We're never going to arrest our way out of this problem and we're never going to stop it altogether. But we can try to educate johns about the dangers to themselves and about the violence the women face. Hopefully we can reduce the demand," said Margolis, who spent nearly three decades working in the LAPD vice squad.

Launched recently by the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office, the Prostitution Diversion Program currently targets only those johns nabbed by the LAPD along a cheerless stretch of Figueroa Boulevard pockmarked by liquor stores and cheap motels - one of the

city's epicenters for street-walking prostitutes.

There are tentative plans to expand the class citywide if the pilot program proves successful, said Sonja Dawson, the no-nonsense city prosecutor who helped start the program.

January's class of johns was a bland bunch. Most appeared to be in their 20s or 30s, with a few others approaching middle age. They wore jeans and inexpensive watches. A few wore wedding bands.

No one stood out. Adding to the sense of anonymity was the program's policy of not addressing the men by their names.

Not everyone is eligible for john school. A man cannot have prior arrests for prostitution, drugs or violent crimes on his rap sheet and must be willing to submit to an HIV blood test. Each john shells out \$600 to cover the cost of the class.

In exchange, the men get a free pass - of sorts. Dawson keeps the misdemeanor solicitation charges hanging over the men's heads for a year. If a john doesn't get arrested again trying to pick up a hooker, his file is closed.

He avoids the typical sentence of 15 days in county jail and a conviction on his record, not to mention the thousands of dollars in legal fees associated with a day in court.

It's not jail, to be sure, but john school is no joke. For

eight hours, the men are yelled at, pleaded with and lectured.

Each presentation is aimed at either scaring them straight with all the terrible things that can be inflicted upon a john or opening their eyes to the ugly realities of the sex-for-money industry.

It's not meant as a feel-good therapy session or an opportunity to explain away bad decisions, so there is no give-and-take in the class. The johns are not allowed to ask questions or speak. They sit and listen.

Ruditsky softens the men up with graphic photographs of swollen, disfigured faces of johns who had been set up by prostitutes to be beaten and robbed.

Next up is a health worker's crash course in sexually transmitted diseases. Backs stiffen and knees bounce nervously as she projects stomach-turning images of infected penises.

Released for a lunch break, the johns squint in the sunlight as they push open the station doors and scatter.

The afternoon session starts with two recovering sex addicts relating stories of how their uncontrolled desires had landed them in police custody and rehabilitation groups.

The day culminates with testimony from two former prostitutes. They shatter the idealized notions that researchers have found johns typically harbor about prostitutes - namely, that the women enjoy the encounters - with stories about their lives of drug abuse, rape and violence at the hands of the pimps they worked for and johns who sometimes beat them.

The City Attorney's Office is targeting prostitutes as well, contracting with a nonprofit group that runs a more extensive job-training and counseling program aimed at getting women off the streets.

Whatever leniency the john school offers goes out the window with repeat offenders.

So far, only one of the 44 graduates has been rearrested,

according to Dawson.

She has charged him with both counts and isn't of any mind to help him avoid the mandatory minimum of a month and a half in jail.

City officials had only to look north for the blueprint when pulling together their class.

Since 1995, a nonprofit group and San Francisco officials have run about 7,000 men through one of the country's first programs.

There are similar programs in Britain, Canada, South Korea and about 40 cities and counties throughout the United States, although not all of them excuse johns from convictions and sentences.