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Fitchburg Fights Prostitution with New Approach; Second Chance Program Focuses on Intervention vs. Punishment

By Christina E. Sanchez; Telegram & Gazette Staff

[Fitchburg, MA] – Elizabeth N. Fardy, perhaps, got caught in the revolving door and shuffled through the system.

Police. Courts. Probation. In the end, back on the streets and stuck in the cyclical life of prostitution.

Then she disappeared in 2002. Her remains were discovered nearly nine months later. Her death was ruled a homicide. Her story is a reminder of the perils prostitutes encounter.

Ms. Fardy never got a second chance. On Sept. 7, six women similar to Ms. Fardy, or “Beth” as her friends called her, will get another shot as they begin the Second Chance program.

The Fitchburg Police Department, Battered Women’s Resources and the Fitchburg District Court Probation Department have joined to create Second Chance.

Coordinators from Battered Women’s Resources, a Leominster-based program to combat domestic violence, will run Second Chance twice a week for each four-week session of the program.

They will teach women about self-esteem, domestic abuse, drugs and alcohol, health education and methods to relieve stress. A \$32,000 grant from the state Executive Office of Public Safety will finance the project.

“I don’t think there is a person who doesn’t remember Beth Fardy’s story,” said Lucille Cormier, chief probation officer at the court. “Everyone knew Beth as a good kid. She hooked up with the wrong people. There’s no one in the Probation Department that wants to see that repeated.”

The first participants: six women arrested last week during a police prostitution sting. During their arraignment Friday, a judge established Second Chance as a condition of their release, along with abstinence from drugs and alcohol. Up to 10 women will participate in each four-week session.

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Joanne Tulonen, executive director of Battered Women's Resources, said Second Chance will give the women tools to look at why they became prostitutes and how they can escape.

"We have to look at what happened in these women's lives that caused them to take up prostitution," Ms. Tulonen said. "Most of these women come from dysfunctional families and faced multiple physical and sexual abuses in childhood."

Self-knowledge will be key to helping at-risk teenage girls, she said. Part two of Second Chance will focus on teenage girls.

"We see an opportunity here for the older women to help these young girls avoid that life," Ms. Tulonen said. "We have to remember they (the women) were all kids at one time. Something happened along the way that no one bothered to address."

The Juvenile Probation Department will identify 10 at-risk girls for the eight-week, eight-session juvenile program, set to begin later in September.

Second Chance was modeled in part after Developing Alternatives for Women Now, a program in Worcester established a little more than a year ago, according to Police Chief Edward F. Cronin.

Second Chance was Chief Cronin's brainchild, a concept born nearly two years ago after he was hired as chief. Domestic violence has been on Chief Cronin's radar for several years.

In 1998, he stepped down as police chief in Gardner to run Project Harmony, a federal program that targets domestic violence in Russia and Ukraine.

He left Project Harmony in 2001, and until May 2002 he was interim executive director of Battered Women's Resources.

When he became Fitchburg police chief, he said, he realized the city had to take on prostitution with a fresh approach, beyond the arrests, the courts and the probation.

"I observe the same people going back out onto the streets. To me, it's like a revolving door," Chief Cronin said. "We have to look at street prostitution from the enforcement point of view, but also we have to look at what we can do to intervene."

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