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## **Spotlight On: “Project Respect” and the “Washington State Model Protocol for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children”**

*By Jessica Saltiel*

### I. INTRODUCTION

In March 2013, Washington became the first state to put forth a model protocol specifically for dealing with the rising issue of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). The model protocol was developed by Project Respect, part of Washington’s Center for Children and Youth Justice (CCYJ). The issues pertaining to CSEC youth cover relatively new territory, and the developers of the protocol emphasize and recognize the need for more information and more research. Because of this, Washington’s model protocol puts forth a flexible and victim-centered approach to establishing policy, implementing training, and encouraging further analysis of this particular field and additional improvements to the protocol.

### II. PROJECT RESPECT AND THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH JUSTICE

Washington’s Center for Children and Youth Justice was founded in 2006 and is a private, nonprofit organization that encourages reform and the development of better practices in Washington’s juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Justice Bobbe J. Bridge founded the Center and now serves as its CEO and president. The Center encourages evidence-based practices, provides funding for research and programs, and proposes legislation. Along with Project Respect, CCYJ maintains many other initiatives, such as Models for Change, which seeks to deter juvenile crime through law enforcement, early intervention, and rebuilding and empowering essential social institutions.

Project Respect was established in response to the statewide need for a uniform protocol for agencies and individuals responding to CSEC situations. In 2011, CCYJ received a two-year grant to develop such a uniform protocol and to assist with subsequent training and implementation. The initiative seeks to approach the situation of CSEC youth with compassion and to encourage state agencies and individuals to view these youth as victims, rather than as criminals. Terri Kimball, the manager of Project Respect, oversaw and coordinated the two-year journey of developing the model protocol and communicated with professionals throughout the state to establish best practices in engaging and supporting CSEC youth. Kimball finds Project Respect’s mission to be essential in allowing CSEC youth to access the resources they need quickly in order to efficiently move towards a path of healing.

In addition to structuring the protocol described below, Project Respect also assists counties in implementing the protocol and training the professionals who will be handling future CSEC cases.

### III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE “WASHINGTON STATE MODEL PROTOCOL FOR COMMERCIALY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN”

Throughout 2012, CCYJ held several mini-summits to collect input from a range of professionals, including judges, juvenile court representatives, law enforcement agents, attorneys, service providers, community advocates and school representatives. This approach – reaching out to individuals currently involved with CSEC issues – was a unique one and has helped this protocol stand out for its credibility based in personal and practical knowledge.

The first summit took place in February 2012, and the summits concluded in August 2012. Over 200 professionals took part in these summits. The themes addressed in these summits covered three key questions regarding: 1) the lay of the land of CSEC situations in the various regions; 2) the meaning of a victim-centered approach; and 3) the ideal response.

The resulting “Washington State Model Protocol for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children” repeatedly encourages those involved in CSEC cases and situations to view these children as crime victims rather than as criminals. This emphasis stems from model mission statements voted on by participants in the summits. These participants overwhelmingly expressed that a victim-centered outlook was essential to implementing a system to provide support to CSEC youth and to allow them to access the resources they need after they are identified. For example, a victim-centered approach encourages avoiding arrest and detention whenever possible. In addition, the summits clarified that a victim-centered approach would be one that focused on the needs of the CSEC youth as individuals.

### IV. AN OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL PROTOCOL

Furthermore, the model protocol centers on concepts of flexibility, collaboration, and training. As for flexibility, the model protocol offers a template for various local jurisdictions to use in identifying CSEC youth and provides them the assistance and support they need. The developers recognize that the exploitation of children does not look the same in the various regions of the state, and the protocol would have to be flexible enough to apply to the various circumstances that arise in different localities. However, the protocol balances this element of flexibility with standardized tools for identification of known risk factors and screening of potential CSEC victims. The protocol is able to directly address the range of circumstances within the umbrella of CSEC, while still providing an element of consistency in the treatment of CSEC youth and the services that would be available to them whatever the location.

In addition, the protocol also encourages the statewide collaboration and coordination between agencies and individuals working with CSEC youth. It provides for three layers of responsibility, one at the statewide level and two at the local and regional levels. The local and regional levels include multidisciplinary teams and task forces. The multidisciplinary teams are smaller, quick responding groups of professionals who take on immediate consultations, while the task forces take on the role

of overseeing the adoption of the model protocol and coordinating community responses under the protocol. Statewide CSEC Coordinating Committees meet annually and receive reports from the local and regional levels to assess efficiency and effectiveness of the current CSEC practices.

Finally, the model protocol encourages further data collection and improvements, recognizing that the issue of CSEC youth is new and somewhat uncharted territory, and this field still requires a greater development of knowledge. The protocol points out that "there is no comprehensive data available on the number of commercially sexually exploited children in Washington and much of the data that is available is problematic. It is vital that we find ways to improve CSEC data collection." As the protocol is implemented throughout Washington, further research can be done to determine what practices and approaches are most effective in both deterring the sexual exploitation of children in general and in providing the most efficient and beneficial support to victims.

## V. CONCLUSION

In 2013, task forces throughout Washington began to implement CCYJ's model protocol. The response from the officials who make up these task forces has been positive, deeming it a "well-crafted, comprehensive blueprint" that will help in both standardizing how CSEC situations are handled and reforming the way people think about sexual exploitation victims. Benton County prosecutor Andy Miller, one of the participants in the development of the protocol, believes that the implementation of the protocol will not only lead to more convictions, but will allow Washington to be one of the strictest states in the country as to CSEC issues.

Project Respect's final product seen in the "Washington State Model Protocol for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children" reflects both an emerging awareness of the issue and presence of CSEC youth in this country as well as a pressing need to keep collecting data and keep researching the best ways to provide desperately needed services to this group of children. Project Respect's development of a model protocol for supporting CSEC youth is an endeavor that should spread to other states, and Washington's example could potentially be used as a template for the unique problems and circumstances that are found throughout the country.

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