

# Sex trafficking happens here, WellHouse tells Irondale, Birmingham Exchange Clubs (video)

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[IRONDALE](#), Alabama -- Tanya Hallford was searching the internet looking for a woman she hoped to help escape a life of sexual exploitation when she saw an advertisement selling two young girls for sex.

"They could not be older than 13 ... Those are babies," Hallford said today during a joint luncheon of the Exchange Clubs of Birmingham and Irondale. "You could tell they were in tears."

Hallford, a lawyer who works for the faith-based [anti-trafficking organization The WellHouse](#), said she notified law enforcement but they were not found and the ad disappeared.

"I've been looking diligently, can't find them anywhere," Hallford said.

It happens all too often, Hallford said, and too few resources are available to help the girls, women and mothers trapped and traded as sex slaves. It happens everywhere from Arkadelphia Road to Mountain Brook, she said.

Oftentimes, they are young runaways lured in with a promise of love and acceptance and find instead abuse and forced prostitution. Younger victims are often turned out by their families. Some come from good families but are lured by the false promises of sex trade recruiters, often who start out as their boyfriends. Some are abducted off the street.

Birmingham is part of a sex trafficking circuit, Hallford said, and sex trafficking victims are taken across Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee via Interstate 20. "There's a lot of money being made in Alabama," she said.

Rescuing the victims is difficult because they often form bonds with the men pimping them out, something Hallford likened to Stockholm Syndrome. Often, they are reluctant to talk to police

because of fear of being arrested for prostitution.

As an example of that, Hallford pointed to the recent [arrests of four women on charges related to prostitution](#) at a spa in Roebuck. That same spa was raided less than a month ago.

"We are treating the victim as a criminal," Hallford said.

And when they are willing and able to escape, often there is nowhere for them to go, Hallford said. The WellHouse can house six adult women, but not their children and not underage victims of exploitation.

"We had someone call recently and we had to tell them no. We didn't have space," Hallford said. "Today, we're meeting with someone who can maybe help us with a location for underage kids."

John Schoen, treasurer of The Exchange Club of Irondale, is working to arrange to have WellHouse speak at a local school after seeing a video the organization put together about the I-20 sex trade circuit.

"It was just choking," Schoen said of the video. "This is abuse to the nth degree."

Hallford said their goal is to show real love to the women they work with so, even if they walk away from WellHouse, they will know it is different from the false claims of love they receive from those who would abuse and exploit them.

"They can come back to us anytime. We don't care what they've done. we want them to be healed and we want them to be whole," Hallford said.