

PURSUE MISSING TEENS



A MOTHER'S LOVE: Samantha O'Keefe of Gloucester holds out a photo of her runaway daughter, Danielle, and the hope that her eldest child will be found safe.

Mom clings to hope of daughter's safety

By LAURA CRIMALDI and HEATHER SCHULTZ

Since turning 14 last February, Danielle Woodsum has run away from home 30 times. So far, she's come home every time, but now she's missing again.

"I've reached out for help everywhere and there's just nothing out there," said her mother, Samantha O'Keefe of Gloucester. "There were pictures of her everywhere, but nobody could find her."

Danielle, now 15, bolted from a group home in Attleboro with another girl March 30. Her mother believes the girl is in the crime-ridden Bowdoin Street area of Dorchester, and is terrified for her safety.

"I'm trying my best not to give up. It's so hard. I have trouble sleeping at night," said O'Keefe, who has two other young children. "It's a matter of time before she becomes the next prostitute, the next drug addict or the next criminal."

The Department of Social Services had taken emergency custody of Woodsum as a result of her repeated flights from home, but authorities said the action was

not the result of abuse. Danielle is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs about 110 pounds. She has long, dark hair. Her mother said she wears hoop earrings and baggy, masculine clothes. This current run is her longest away from home.

"She thinks she's a gangster and she's not at all," O'Keefe said.

O'Keefe said Boston police Sgt. Detective Kelley O'Connell has been immensely helpful in the search. When Danielle went missing in other communities, police weren't so helpful, she said.

Last week, O'Keefe spent a day in Boston handing out photographs of her daughter. Danielle tends to hang out in MBTA stations and trains, where she asks strangers for money, claiming that she needs T fare to get home.

Danielle phoned home last week to say that she was OK. Since then, O'Keefe has received hang-up calls that she believes were placed by her daughter.

"She's probably thinking, 'My mom hates me,'" O'Keefe said. "I just never give up. No matter how frustrating it gets."

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Media efforts help bring Wakefield girl back home

By HEATHER SCHULTZ

In Wakefield, as in many towns, limited resources mean runaways often are given scant police attention. But one officer made it his mission this month to find a missing girl.

The usual techniques had gone nowhere for Wakefield police Sgt. Richard DiNanno. He had contacted the girl's friends, posted a notice on the police department's Web site and put out bulletins.

"Nothing was happening," he said.

Driven by the family's concern for the girl's welfare, DiNanno took a step unusual for the town: He got her father's permission to notify the media. The department then

pleaded for help in the search. "I'm not positive that it made a difference," DiNanno said. "But I think it did."

After the publicity, the girl reached out to a friend. The friend found her at TD Banknorth Garden in Boston and brought her back to Wakefield, where he contacted the police.

Lt. John MacKay praised DiNanno's initiative. He said it might be a tactic the Wakefield police will use again.

MacKay said in this case the father was very involved and concerned about the welfare of his daughter, who the department requested the Herald not identify.

The father "told us the urgency of it," MacKay said.

MacKay acknowledged that the town's runaway cas-



RICHARD DINANNO

es often are not treated as urgent — partly because many troubled teen residents at Wakefield's group homes frequently run away.

MacKay and DiNanno are glad this case got special attention.

"It feels good. It's another worry you don't have to worry about. I can imagine how a parent would feel," DiNanno said.

Prostitution lures the desperate

By LAURA CRIMALDI and O'RYAN JOHNSON

Experts believe that within 48 hours of leaving home, a teen runaway will be in danger of being lured into prostitution, either in exchange for necessities or by pimps posing as modeling scouts.

"Girls will go ahead and run away and exchange sex for shelter, and that's exploitation," said Olinka Briceno, co-founder of the Cambridge-based Vox Project, which is launching a national campaign to raise awareness about sexual exploitation, prostitution and human trafficking.

Since 2005, the Teen Prostitution Prevention Project at the Suffolk District Attorney's Office has identified 135 underage prostitutes in the Greater Boston area alone. A whopping 70 percent of those prostitutes are runaways, said DA

spokesman Jake Wark.

Department of Social Services Chief of Staff Mia Alvarado is working with the DA's prevention project to create a nine-bed residential program that would give girls an escape from the streets.

Beginning in 2005, DSS outreach workers fanned out around Suffolk County to identify teen prostitutes and convince them to leave the streets, Alvarado said. But she said one meeting is not enough. Typically it takes several tries before workers can convince a girl to come in and accept help.

"There are youths who are tired of being beaten, raped and abused by the people who put them into this business, but it does take a long time," she said.

Though the project has identified more than 100 underage prostitutes in Boston, social workers know many victims remain

hidden in the shadows.

"We're really only hitting the tip of the iceberg," said Shiela Y. Moore, executive director of Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc., a Boston-based shelter and service agency for runaways and homeless teens. "It's big business. There is a lot of money involved and there are a lot of guys out there. It's happening in front of our faces."

Pimps are known to troll Downtown Crossing, MBTA stations and malls looking for vulnerable girls, Bridge counselor Anneli Strandberg wrote in a memo. Some pimps pose as modeling agency scouts or simply claim they are looking for a girlfriend.

"The average age of teen prostitutes (has) dropped from 16 to 13 and pimps are boldly advertising their escort services on Web sites such as craigslist," Strandberg said.

APRIL 15, 2007 BOSTON SUNDAY HERALD

For help

Runaways can seek help by calling these numbers:

National Runaway Switchboard: 1-800-RUNAWAY. Runaways

can find shelters and resources and also leave messages for their parents.

Bridge Over Troubled Waters: 617-423-9575.

The Boston-based program offers a variety of services for homeless, runaway and other at-risk youths.

— HERALD STAFF