

More about PORA

Originally called Prostitutes, Options, Referrals and Alternatives, PORA incorporated in 1993. Now called Positive Options, Referrals and Alternatives, PORA concentrates on helping women in the sex industry.

Funded with government grants and private donations, the organization runs a six-bed residential center at 930 S. 11th St. where it also has a food pantry. The group works with a variety of social service agencies to help clients obtain counseling, medical care and other services.

The recently announced federal grant of \$115,000 is a huge increase in funding for PORA, which has had annual revenues of between \$125,000 and \$209,000 for the past three years.

Grant allows outreach to resume

By BRUCE RUSHTON
STAFF WRITER

Street outreach work aimed at prostitutes and other exploited people is resuming in Springfield thanks to a federal grant.

Positive Options, Referrals and Alternatives had ceased most street-level outreach work last year after losing funding from the Sangamon County Department of Public Health, said PORA executive director Bernie Carver. However, a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is allowing the 13-year-old charity to hire new employees who will visit bars, bus stations, rest stops and other areas frequented by sex workers and others who need help.

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The \$115,000 grant announced in September is the largest ever landed by PORA, which began as a service aimed at prostitutes who want to leave the street. In addition to outreach work, PORA provides drug and alcohol counseling and also runs a six-bed shelter where women can live until they're ready to support themselves. The group supplies emergency food and condoms, too.

The HHS grant was one of 18 awarded nationwide to help victims of human trafficking. PORA's was the fourth largest and is renewable for three years, so the organization could collect nearly \$350,000 in federal money.

Springfield's location at the intersection of two interstates and at the center of the state makes it a gathering spot for victims of human trafficking, Carver said. The organization's

history also helped land the grant he said.

"I think a big factor is we already have a mission to assist sex workers which is the largest segment of human trafficking. without a doubt," Carver said.

The grant will result in PORA expanding its mission a bit to cover restaurant employees, farm workers and others who might be exploited. Caner added. Mail-order brides and legal adoptions also are issues that interest PORA, he said.

A pending federal case against the owners of Buffet City, who are accused of recruiting illegal immigrants and underpaying them, shows that human trafficking can occur in cities like Springfield, Carver noted.

"It's a little bit of an extension of what we've been doing," he said. "This grant will extend to other forms of human trafficking."

In addition to outreach workers, the money will pay for a billboard campaign to raise awareness of the issue, Carver said.

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