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Release # 83-2008
www.queensda.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 2008

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**QUEENS GRAND JURY HANDS UP STATE'S FIRST SEX TRAFFICKING
INDICTMENT AGAINST SOUTH OZONE PARK MAN
FOR FORCING 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL INTO PROSTITUTION**

Defendant Faces Up To 25 Years in State Prison

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown announced today that a Queens County grand jury has indicted a 22-year-old South Ozone Park resident on charges of using intimidation and threats of murder to force a 16-year-old girl to perform sexual acts for pay for nearly a dozen male customers a day. The indictment marks the first time that someone in New York State has been indicted under the state's "sex trafficking" statute since its enactment last year.

District Attorney Brown said, "The defendant is accused of participating in a modern-day version of slavery by holding a teenage girl captive and coercing her through psychological intimidation to prostitute herself for his own financial gain. Few activities are as brutal and dehumanizing as prostitution. The defendant's alleged actions as the victim's pimp and captor not only forced her into a life of degradation, but put her at risk of contracting a myriad of serious and fatal diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately for him, state lawmakers gave prosecutors a new tool last year to bring those who victimize and exploit such vulnerable individuals to justice and put them behind bars for a long time."

The District Attorney identified the defendant as Woodley Gaston, 22, of 118-08 Rockaway Boulevard in Queens. Gaston was arraigned today before Queens County Supreme Court Justice Kenneth Holder on a six-count indictment charging him with the crimes of sex trafficking, second- and third-degree promoting prostitution, third-degree rape, endangering the welfare of a child and permitting prostitution. The defendant, who faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted, was ordered held on \$350,000 bail and to return to court on August 12, 2008.

District Attorney Brown said that, according to the charges, Gaston befriended the 16-year-old victim – buying her clothes and paying for her to get her hair and nails done — and forced her to work for him as a prostitute between March 5, 2008, and March 23, 2008, at "tracks" (known prostitution locations frequented by prostitutes and their customers) located at Sutphin Boulevard, between South Road and 107th Avenue, and at Conduit Avenue near John F. Kennedy Airport. The defendant also allegedly advertised the victim on the Craig's List Internet site. The victim, it is alleged, was expected to have sex with approximately ten men a day and to give Gaston all the money she earned prostituting herself. It is further alleged that during this time, the teenage victim stayed at Gaston's house, where he had sexual intercourse with her and repeatedly threatened to kill her if she left him or went with another pimp.

(MORE)

District Attorney Brown said that the state legislation strengthening penalties against human trafficking and providing assistance to victims was enacted on June 6, 2007, and took effect on November 1, 2007. Among the legislation's provisions was the creation of a new class B felony – “sex trafficking” – for perpetrators who profit from prostitution by engaging in sex trafficking; requiring those convicted of sex trafficking to register as sex offenders with the state; providing social service assistance to victims – such as temporary housing, health and mental health treatment and drug addiction treatment; and ensuring that sex trafficking victims were eligible for services from the Crime Victims Board.

The new law recognizes that the battle against human trafficking is a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency obligation. It created an Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking, co-chaired by Commissioner Denise E. O'Donnell of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and Commissioner David A. Hansell of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The Task Force was established to help educate the law enforcement, victim, advocacy and legal communities about the new law and its potential to both punish the purveyors of human trafficking and assist the victims. All 62 district attorneys and the more than 500 police agencies statewide have been briefed on the law and DCJS is providing on-site training to prosecutors and law enforcement officers.

“Investigation of human trafficking requires a different way of looking at crime, a different approach to observation and surveillance, a different understanding of the relationship between prostitution and sex trafficking,” Commissioner O'Donnell said. “This indictment is an important and historic milestone in our effort to eradicate sex trafficking in New York State. I applaud District Attorney Brown and the Queens law enforcement community for pursuing this investigation.”

David A. Hansell, Commissioner of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), said the legislation has also resulted in 38 confirmed trafficking victims being referred to OTDA for services.

“New York's unique approach to human trafficking ties aggressive prosecution of perpetrators to immediate and essential services to trafficking victims,” Commissioner Hansell said. “This indictment and the services we are providing show that the law is working to combat the very serious problem of human trafficking.”

The investigation was conducted by Detectives David Velez and James Ropenus, of the New York Police Department's Queens Special Victims Squad, under the supervision of Lieutenant Arthur Hall.

Assistant District Attorney Mina Q. Malik, of the District Attorney's Special Victims Bureau, is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Marjory D. Fisher, Bureau Chief, and Kenneth M. Appelbaum and Lucinda C. Suarez, Deputy Bureau Chiefs, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Major Crimes Charles A. Testagrossa and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Major Crimes Daniel A. Saunders.

It should be noted that an indictment is merely an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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