

Peel social worker wins ETFO Social Activism Award

Kathryn Cummings, founder of The Elizabeth Fry Society's Empowering Against Exploitation Program, has received the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) 2015 Social Activism Award.

The award is presented to an individual woman or a group of women who do not hold ETFO membership but have been outstanding social activists on behalf of women and children in Ontario.

The issue of commercial sexual exploitation is particularly important in Peel, given that more than half of Canadian cases of human trafficking in 2012 were investigated by Peel Regional Police. In the fall of 2013, Cummings launched Empowering Against Exploitation (EAE), a preventive education program provided by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Peel-Halton for girls who are vulnerable to, or have experienced commercial sexual exploitation. EAE groups are offered weekly in schools, community centres, foster care agencies, youth shelters and other community settings, using a nationally acclaimed 10-session curriculum developed in the United States.

Cummings studied commercial sexual exploitation throughout her Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) at Carleton University and then spent a year in Cambodia, working with trafficked women. EAE blends a variety of activities, including discussions, creative art, journaling and education on healthy relationships to foster self-reflection, understanding about the issue and knowledge to help girls identify potentially exploitive situations.

She has also developed training for Peel service providers to assist them in understanding commercial sexual exploitation, who is vulnerable, how girls are recruited and how to respond.

Given that girls as young as age 13 are trafficked into forced prostitution across Canada, Kathryn's program is vitally important, said ETFO President Sam Hammond. Only by increasing knowledge of this issue among educators and service providers can society provide the protection and support that girls need to avoid or escape from commercial sexual exploitation.