



SOCIAL SERVICES NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: Feb. 8, 2017

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HOW YOU CAN HELP STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING

HICKORY -- Although it often goes unreported, there are many victims of human trafficking in the United States. They are often lured here from foreign countries, believing they are coming for a legitimate job or educational opportunity. Once here, they may be forced into jobs they did not agree to do, or forced into the sex trade. Their passports or visas may be confiscated to keep them from leaving. If they do not speak English, they face additional hurdles in seeking help. In addition, many of these victims are afraid of law enforcement and government agencies.

Persons who are born in this country may also be taken advantage of in a similar manner. They may be teen run-aways who leave home with someone they believe they can trust, only to be forced into servitude or sexually exploited. Once in this situation, it is difficult to leave, since they often live in fear of those who are holding them captive, and may feel guilt or shame about their situation. Many victims lack self-esteem and are afraid to ask for help, making this a difficult crime to investigate.

A spokesperson for the Catawba County Sheriff's Department said they had not received any reports of human trafficking. The Hickory Police Department also had no reports of human trafficking in the past two years. A spokesperson for the Hickory department said that it could be happening, but just not reported.

A publication by the FBI states: "Human trafficking remains one of the fastest growing areas of organized criminal activity around the globe. While exact numbers are unknown, estimates show that at least 600,000 to 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked across international borders every year, and between 14,500 and 17,500 of those victims are trafficked into the United States. More than 80 percent of the victims are female and 70 percent of these victims are forced into the commercial sex trade."

On Eagles Wings Ministries, based in Charlotte, is the only organization in the Carolinas that operates a safe house for girls age 12 through 18 who have been sexually trafficked. The non-denominational Christian organization opened its safe house in 2009, and since that time has served more than 300 girls. Lori Vaccaro, president of the organization, said that in Charlotte, victims are often sold to visitors attending major sporting and entertainment events. In smaller metropolitan areas, such as Hickory, the problem might look different. About 40 percent of the time, it is a close friend or relative who forces a teen victim into prostitution. The victim does not have to be transported out of his/her home area to be a victim of sexual trafficking, although that may happen. Vaccaro said that almost all the victims her organization serves were born in the United States. Only about one out of 100 victims manages to escape, she said.

If you suspect someone is a victim of human trafficking, please report it to your local law enforcement agency. Officials caution that it is not a good idea to approach the trafficker or victim directly, as this could be dangerous. How can you tell whether someone may be a victim of human trafficking? According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, here are some indicators:

Common Work and Living Conditions:

- Is not free to leave or come and go as he/she wishes
- Is in the commercial sex industry and has a pimp / manager
- Is unpaid, paid very little, or paid only through tips
- Works excessively long and/or unusual hours
- Is not allowed breaks or suffers under unusual restrictions at work
- Owes a large debt and is unable to pay it off
- Was recruited through false promises concerning the nature and conditions of his/her work
- High security measures exist in the work and/or living locations (e.g. opaque windows, boarded up windows, bars on windows, barbed wire, security cameras, etc.)

Poor Mental Health or Abnormal Behavior:

- Is fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous/paranoid
- Exhibits unusually fearful or anxious behavior after bringing up law enforcement
- Avoids eye contact

Poor Physical Health:

- Lacks medical care and/or is denied medical services by employer
- Appears malnourished or shows signs of repeated exposure to harmful chemicals
- Shows signs of physical and/or sexual abuse, physical restraint, confinement, or torture

Lack of Control:

- Has few or no personal possessions
- Is not in control of his/her own money, no financial records, or bank account
- Is not in control of his/her own identification documents (ID or passport)
- Is not allowed or able to speak for themselves (a third party may insist on being present and/or translating)

Other:

- Claims of just visiting and inability to clarify where he/she is staying/address
- Lack of knowledge of whereabouts and/or of what city he/she is in
- Loss of sense of time
- Has numerous inconsistencies in his/her story

More information is available from the National Human Trafficking Hotline at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org>, or by calling the hotline at 1-888-373-7888. More information about On Eagles Wings shelter for former trafficking victims is available at <https://www.oneagleswingsministries.org>.

If you have reason to believe a child, youth or adult is being trafficked, please report your suspicions. You could save a life.