

Human Trafficking in Broome County: Getting victims to step forward

By Emily De Vito

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(WBNG Binghamton) There is currently no way to track the number of victims of a silent crime in Broome County.

Human Trafficking is not easy to detect and many victims don't want to step forward. It's a national problem that's growing in New York State.

"Human trafficking under the federal definition, any child under the age of 19 engages in a commercial sex act or there's something of value given to that child in return," Safe Harbour Coordinator Christine Battisiti said.

The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, in just the first four months of this year, said it's already matched the number of confirmed human trafficking victims. In 2015, there were 104 confirmed victims of human trafficking. As of April 2016 – there were 105. More victims are reporting the crime.

Before a law became effect in January, only law enforcement sources could make direct referrals. It's widely believed that many victims are hesitant to work with law enforcement because of the lies their traffickers tell this vulnerable population about what will happen if they report trafficking to persons in places of authority.

In Broome County -- a federal jury convicted Antonio Ballard, a Binghamton man, of engaging in a sex trafficking business involving three minor girls in Broome County.

"Do I think it's happening more and more, yes," Broome County District Attorney Steve Cornwell (R) said. "But trying to find that, reaching out to people and getting people to come forward that's the next goal that's what we have to work on."

Case workers compare sex trafficking victims to domestic violence victims. They said it can be hard for them to come forward because a trafficker will provide them with love and affection. But a project called Safe Harbour is attempting to make it easier for victims to step forward.

"I think victims don't identify as a victim so it's really going to take the community to be aware of what it is to reach those victims," Battisiti said.

In November the Crime Victims Assistance Center received a \$100,000 grant. The money came from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) through our local Department of Social Services.

Safe Harbour is also partnering with the Broome County Child Advocacy Center, which is a multi-disciplinary team that responds to allegations of child sex abuse. They are also partnering with law enforcement, mental health professionals, and child protective services.

Only 30 counties in the state received funds for the Safe Harbour Project. The project brings awareness about sex trafficking -- especially among youth. According to OCFS, the signing into law of the New York State Safe Harbour for Exploited Children Act in 2008, was a key moment in protecting and securing services for sexually exploited youth.

OCFS said prior to the Act's passage, sexually exploited youth involved in illegal activities did not receive the protection of the Family Court and were instead prosecuted criminally, which did little more than to re-traumatize these victims.

"Right now there's not a system in place to check the data [of confirmed human trafficking victims in Broome County], that is what Safe Harbor is going to be doing," Battisiti said. "The more partnerships we develop, and the more agencies we have reporting those numbers the more accurate it will be."

The project provides agencies with a rapid indicator tool. It's a series of questions child welfare case worker look at in order to determine if children and teens could be victims.

Safe Harbour has also created a task force with organizations such as the Greater Binghamton Health Center, the Children's Home of Wyoming, The American Civic Association and more. The project helps educate agencies on how to deal with youth sex trafficking victims.

The Children's Home of Wyoming Conference will soon have safe beds for trafficking victims.

"I have yet to go to an agency where they have said we have not seen that," Battisti said. "Every agency at my table has had a case of it."

The goal is to make victims feel comfortable about speaking out

"We can provide a gateway to youth who are potentially the victims to trafficking but also just youth who have risk factors that make them more vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking," LGBT Youth Specialist at Identity Youth Center Charity Corman said.

Identity Youth Center on State Street is one of the first agencies to partner with the project. Case workers from the Crime Victims Assistance Center (CVAC) will start coming into the center a few hours a week as well as teach staff at the youth center how to identify potential victims.

"Our interest is always making sure that the youth of our community have the resources they need to address the problems that they're facing," Coroman said.

Battisti said her biggest goal right now though, is to get more teenage victims to the CVAC.

"We need to show them the resources that are available," Battisti said. "I don't think there should be any youth in our community that feel like they have to have sex for a place to stay, food or shelter."

In a continued effort to educate the public, there will be a seminar on child sex trafficking on May 20 at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Endicott. The Director of Human Trafficking prevention for New York State's Division of Criminal Justice Services will be the main speaker.

Action News also reached out to the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. In a statement, Director of Public Information Krisit Berner said:

"Governor Cuomo is committed to putting human traffickers behind bars and helping victims get their lives back. In addition to increasing penalties for trafficking crimes and making it easier for victims to receive support services, New York State's Trafficking Victims Protection and Justice Act, signed by Governor Cuomo last fall, enables legal and social service providers to make direct referrals to New York State, allowing the state to identify more victims."