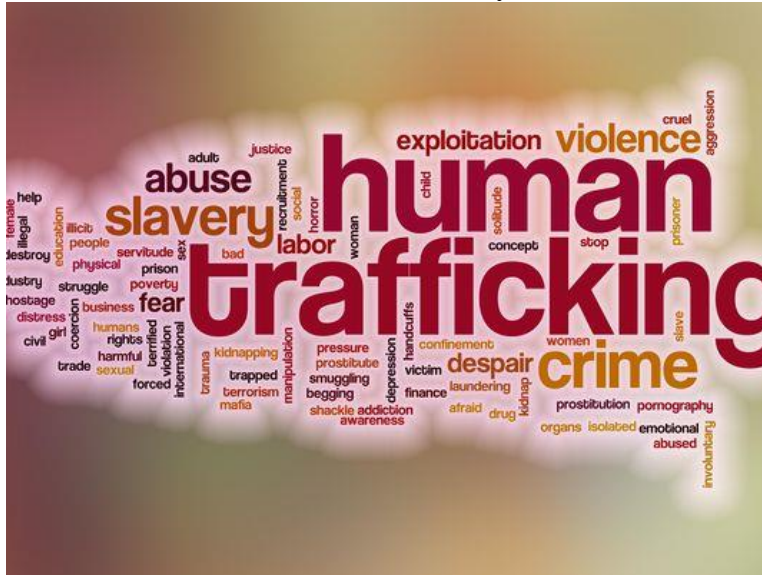


Human trafficking is modern-day slavery

Sheila J. Poole 12:05 a.m. EST January 23, 2016



(Photo: Thinkstock)

Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. It is a human rights violation in which people are bought and sold like commodities so their traffickers can profit from exploiting them for labor or sex. While it may sound like a Third World problem, the National Human Trafficking Resource Center says New York state is among the top four states where human trafficking occurs.

Human trafficking victims are among us, yet they are often unseen. They may be accused of committing crimes or of being traffickers themselves, when the reality is that they are being coerced or preyed upon by others. Victims are often girls and women, but a significant number of boys are victimized, too.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo established a state Interagency Task Force to help New Yorkers recognize and report human trafficking and to train law enforcement and social and human services personnel to spot it. Efforts also include educational outreach and an awareness campaign along the New York State Thruway. Education and awareness initiatives are paying off. Recently, law enforcement arrested 30 people related to a Syracuse-area sex trafficking ring with 18 young female victims; and a Rochester sting netted seven arrests and spared a group of nine girls from sexual servitude.

The New York state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) works to combat human trafficking through efforts that include the Safe Harbour Project, which assists local social services and voluntary agencies in developing and providing services such as safe housing or

emergency housing, mental health counseling, medical care, substance abuse counseling and education and employment skills for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation.

OCFS also trains people working in child welfare, law enforcement and other fields to look for signs that a young person may be a victim of human trafficking. The agency now requires that child welfare workers screen children in their care and those they encounter through child protective services to determine if they have been victims of sex trafficking or are at risk of being victimized. Those children can then be referred for services to address their victimization or to prevent future victimization. This is an important step in combatting sex trafficking of children in foster care and children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect.

Many of the populations OCFS serves are particularly at risk of trafficking, including children who have histories of physical, sexual or emotional abuse; young people who have substance abuse or mental health issues; youth in foster care or the juvenile justice system; runaways or homeless youth; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning youth. Traffickers may exploit a teen who has run away from physical or sexual abuse at home, or one whose family has rejected them because of their sexuality or gender identity.

How can you tell if a child is a victim of trafficking? Look for the signs. The child: frequently runs away from home; spends a lot of time with a controlling older person; is being stalked; has a violent intimate partner; won't discuss where they got money or why they have things beyond their means; is "working" and not in school; has gaps in their story; is fearful, anxious or showing signs of being traumatized.

. January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. Let us observe it by becoming ever more vigilant in stopping this modern-day slavery and compassionately supporting survivors.

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