

January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month



*Melissa Pennachi, DVS
Victim Services Coordinator, Newark Police Department
Council Member, Delaware Human Trafficking Interagency Coordinating Council*

The phrase “human trafficking” may sound misleading to some. Due to the terminology, it often elicits thoughts of people literally being taken across state or international lines. While that may happen in some cases, human trafficking, in its simplest definition, is a form of modern day slavery. Victims are exploited for commercial gains, made to engage in commercial sex acts or labor services against their will, sometimes out of their own home.

Victims of human trafficking are controlled via force, fraud, or coercion. If the victim is a juvenile, there does not need to be any proof that they were forced into any of the activity as they’re too young to consent.

Sex trafficking and labor trafficking are the two main types of human trafficking. Labor trafficking may involve a person being forced to work against their will, and their license, identification card, or passport may be taken from them to that they cannot leave their job. They may be promised a certain wage but are paid substantially less. Sex trafficking involves victims being sold for sex. For victims of any type of trafficking, force, fraud, or coercion must exist. For sex trafficking, often times the victim knows the trafficker. Much like a domestic violence abuser, traffickers will manipulate the victim. Sometimes, the victim is dating the trafficker and then is forced or coerced to engage in sex with others. The victim doesn’t see the money, but the trafficker does. Sometimes, the trafficker has multiple “girlfriends”. Often times there are threats of violence, or violence is used outright, to control the victims. One victim may not be physically assaulted, but knows to believe the threats as they have heard that others were beaten before. Human trafficking victims lose their freedom as traffickers make it difficult to leave. Aside from the very real threat of physical force or death, traffickers will control all aspects of the victims’ lives – taking their IDs, money, and phones. Traffickers will isolate victims, with victims losing connections to friends and family.

Trafficking can be difficult to identify and investigate. Training has been done statewide to law enforcement, as well as community partners, to better identify and investigate trafficking, but we still have a way to go. We might interact with a victim in a situation where they are not identifying themselves as a trafficking victim; maybe we are working with the person as a runaway; or maybe the person is listed as a victim in a domestic violence case, but isn’t comfortable relaying being sold for sex. It can take time and multiple interactions with victims to build rapport and gain their trust for them to disclose any of the abuse that has occurred. It’s difficult to capture the data, but with the continuing work and training around trafficking we will be better able to identify and respond to victims.

[Polaris Project](#) handles the 24/7 [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), which can be accessed via phone call, text, or on the web. In 2018 alone, the hotline had over 14,000 calls, to which over 5,000 were cases of human trafficking. In Delaware in 2018, 27 calls were placed to the hotline, with 16 being identified as human trafficking. Of the 16, at least 15 were female, and at least 4 were juveniles. Fourteen were identified as sex trafficking cases. Due to the difficulty in identifying trafficking victims, it’s likely these numbers are low, and these numbers are just from the national hotline. Work is being done on the state level by the Human Trafficking Interagency Coordinating Council and Delaware Coalition Against Trafficking to better gather and track data related to human trafficking.

If you believe someone is being trafficked, or you are a victim, please contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888 or text the word "HELP" or "INFO" to 233733. With the national hotline, tips can be made from people who believe that they have identified a possible trafficking victim. When a call comes into the national hotline, it is then sent to the appropriate agencies in that area to respond to the call.

For more information about human trafficking including raising awareness and spotting the signs, please check out:

- <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>
- <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>
- <https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/admin/humantrafinteragcouncil.html>