

Human Trafficking Happens Everywhere, Including Delaware

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On the morning of January 10, 2018, advocates, child welfare workers, healthcare professionals, attorneys, state prosecutors, local police departments and more gathered at Delaware State University in Dover with the mission to learn more about human sex trafficking in the state of Delaware and at large.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines human trafficking as “modern-day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.”

Human trafficking happens everywhere, including Delaware. It was not until the last three years people from all different professions began to recognize the overwhelming need to come together to confront this issue in our state. The one-day training, held at the Martin Luther King Jr. Student Center, was at capacity packed with advocates, direct service agencies, and people from the community. The training, titled “Trafficking Service Providers Collaboration Day,” included a screening of the documentary film “I Am Jane Doe” as well as a panel discussion with key stakeholders about two recent human sex trafficking cases in Delaware.

Sex trafficking is a complex issue that includes numerous players to perpetuate violence against an individual. There is the victim, who is the one being coerced and sold, the pimp who is selling the victim, and the John who buys the victim. While speaking on the panel, F.B.I. Special Agent Christopher Lake said pimps are increasingly using social media to groom and recruit their victims. Lake said pimps will use power and control to keep their victims, as they will eventually become dependent on them for food, money and shelter. In addition, trafficking is moving online with websites such as Backpage and Craigslist becoming vehicles for pimps to sell their victims.

As far as who becomes a pimp, Lake said, “Trafficking is a crime of opportunity. People are looking to make money.” Lake explained how you can sell drugs for profit once but a person can be sold over and over.

When asked about hotspots in Delaware, F.B.I. Victim Specialist Elisa Lehman said, “It’s happening all over.” Lehman noted that the motels along Route 13 have been places of interest, while others voiced concerns about the Interstate 95 corridor.

Elizabeth Van Pelt, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Delaware, said most of the cases she has come in contact with are “domestic, youth from unstable homes or homeless and vulnerable to crime.”

Victims of sex trafficking are often broken down by their pimp, believing they are at fault for their own victimization. Some victims are runaways from the foster system or other homes where abuse is also present.

Lehman said one of the hardest things she deals with on a daily basis is getting victims to see themselves as victims. Another element to human trafficking that tends to go unnoticed is labor trafficking. Victims of labor trafficking are exploited and forced to work or perform services against their will, often for little to no pay. Immigrants are a vulnerable population for forced labor as their captor can control them through threats of deportation.

Overall, human trafficking is an issue in Delaware. Delaware is in need of expanding its services to help victims. One thing everyone in the community can do is to educate themselves on recognizing trafficking victims.

Trafficking victims are in plain sight and can be any age, race, gender or nationality, including U.S. citizens. Some indicators that an individual is being trafficked can include scars, burns, or other mutilations on the person's body, lack of personal identification or documents and personal possession, and if the person appears fearful, timid, and submissive.

The training emphasized the need to work together as a community as human trafficking is happening, and a multidisciplinary approach will allow us to have a bigger impact. Bringing different agencies together will help us combat this issue and help victims.

"This is not a single agency problem," said Josette Manning, the Cabinet Secretary for the Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families. "Learn who your partners are."

If you or someone you know has been a victim of human trafficking, resources are available. Call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888 to connect with service providers in your area, provide information on potential human trafficking activity, and for further education.