

Agencies, police team up against human trafficking

By Bethanie Gengler
OSHKOSH HERALD

Situated along the Interstate 41 corridor, the Fox Valley is considered a hot spot for human trafficking.

With motels and hotels lining the interstate and many large events that can draw thousands of visitors from all over the country, the span between Milwaukee and Green Bay is considered especially attractive for sex trafficking.

Human trafficking involves the exploitation of a person through force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of commercial sex or forced labor, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

In 2021, 111 survivors of human trafficking contacted the Wisconsin Trafficking Hotline. From those calls, 95 human trafficking cases were identified with 166 victims.

Nora Gonzalez Carvajal is an anti-human trafficking victims advocate at Reach Counseling in Neenah.

Reach helped 58 survivors of trafficking in 2021 and about 70 survivors in 2022. Most of the cases involve people living in the Fox Valley.

Gonzalez Carvajal said the human trafficking survivors come from all backgrounds and ages. About 40% of the survivors are black women.

"This is because traffickers often think they'll land less jail time if caught trafficking black women in comparison to white women," she said.

Victims are targeted by traffickers because of a variety of vulnerabilities. Children are especially targeted through social media, mobile devices and interactive gaming.

A common misconception is that human trafficking victims are snatched off the street. Gonzalez Carvajal said traffickers are more subtle in their approach and will groom their victims.

"Traffickers will look for a need they can fill," she said. "This may simply be buying the victim something new like a phone,



Gonzalez

jewelry, clothes; or giving them cash, drugs or alcohol."

She added there is a correlation between addiction and sex trafficking because once victims are hooked on drugs or alcohol, the trafficker becomes a source of supply, making it harder to leave.

"Anything to hook them," Gonzalez Carvajal said. "Sometimes traffickers demand sex as a repayment and will use fraud, force or coercion to exert control over the victim."

Grooming also involves showing the victim affection, attention and false promises or providing support to a young person who isn't getting it at home.

Human trafficking generates \$150.2 billion in illegal profits each year, according to the International Labor Organization.

Area law enforcement notes that events such as Packers games, PGA tournaments, EAA AirVenture and music festivals make the community especially susceptible to human trafficking.

When victims are trafficked in an unfamiliar location, it makes it more difficult for them to leave. Because of the grooming involved, victims may not even be aware they

are being exploited.

Some common indicators of human trafficking include a person who isn't allowed to speak for themselves, appears disconnected or refuses to make eye contact, shows signs of physical abuse or sexualized behaviors.

A person who is being trafficked is often in the company of someone who seems to control where they go and who they talk to.

Gonzalez Carvajal said human traffickers are extremely dangerous.

"If you're worried a friend or loved one is actively being trafficked, it is critical that you reach out to local law enforcement for support," she said.

For survivors of human trafficking, several local resources are available.

- Damascus Road is a nonprofit in Oshkosh that began in 2009 dedicated to raising awareness and assisting victims of human trafficking in the Fox Valley and statewide. Since 2017, Damascus Road said it has assisted more than 550 survivors of trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation. More information is available at damascusroadproject.org.

- 5-stones is a nonprofit organization started in 2010 in the Fox Valley that works to increase awareness of human trafficking,

decrease the demand for commercial sex, prevent victimization and network with other organizations that fight against human trafficking. More information is available at www.5-stones.org.

- Reach Counseling at 1509 S. Commercial St. in Neenah offers support for survivors of sexual assault and human trafficking including medical advocacy, legal advocacy, personal advocacy, basic needs assistance and licensed therapists. It also offers a 24-hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line at 920-722-8150.

In correlation with January's Human Trafficking Prevention Month, Attorney General Josh Kaul announced the creation of a Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force to support survivors and ensure justice is served to those who commit a crime.

The task force is a partnership of federal, state and tribal law enforcement, and victim service providers.

"This task force will enhance efforts in Wisconsin to combat human trafficking and provide support for survivors," Kaul said. "By bringing law enforcement and victim service providers together, we can help ensure that Wisconsin is taking a comprehensive approach to fighting this crime."

Farmer Roundtable to share soil health practices

The Fox-Wolf Watershed Alliance is inviting farmers, landowners and agricultural industry professionals to Farmer Roundtable events, including one Feb. 15 at Brighton Acres in Oshkosh.

The Winnebago Waterways Farmer Roundtable from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. will discuss using cover crops to meet farm goals, incorporating grazing into cash grain

operations, creating a soil health system, conservation practices resources and potential funding, and an opportunity to engage with a panel of farmers.

Registration includes refreshments, a hot lunch buffet and drink ticket for networking. Visit soilhealthinprogress.org for more event information and to register. Advance registration is required.

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