



In Our Backyards

The hidden scourge
of human trafficking

by Erika Peterman

On the surface, the \$600,000 rental home was just another residence on the **St. Petersburg** area's affluent **Treasure Island**. An investigation by the **Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking** uncovered the dark secret behind its doors.

The home was occupied by a pimp and his female sex trafficking victims, who were forced to dance in strip clubs and prostitute themselves. Not many miles away and just months ago, a joint investigation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Clearwater Police Department revealed that another pimp was preying on young women by supplying them with narcotics as part of a scheme of coercion into sex trafficking. A search warrant of his trailer led to the discovery of more than 10,000 prescription pills that were being used to control the victims.

Both were examples of human trafficking, a crime that is often hidden in plain sight across Florida.

"We don't want to believe it in this day and time. People think, 'There's no way this could be going on. Not next door to me,'" said **Clearwater Police Chief Anthony Holloway**. "Don't think it can't happen in your community, because it's happening all over the place."

The simplest description of human trafficking is modern-day slavery, and it victimizes people of all ages – U.S. citizens as well as immigrants. More specifically, according to the Florida State University Center for the Advancement of Human Rights (CAHR), human trafficking is "the transporting, soliciting, recruiting, harboring, providing, or obtaining of another person for transport for the purposes of forced labor, domestic servitude or sexual

exploitation using force, fraud and/or coercion."

Human trafficking may not be highly visible or immediately obvious, but it is prevalent throughout the state. In fact, Florida is fertile ground for the crime. According to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, Florida was ranked number three in the United States for the number of calls to its hotline in 2011.

Noel Thomas, former anti-human trafficking coordinator for the Florida Department of Children & Families, said a number of factors contribute to the state's appeal to traffickers. In addition to having port cities, several international airports and major transportation routes such as I-95 (truckers sometimes engage in trafficking), Florida has a large migrant population, a significant agriculture industry, and many foster and runaway children who are vulnerable to victimization.

"We really get the gamut of trafficking," Thomas said.

Labor trafficking is the most common type of trafficking in Florida, said **Vania Llovera**, assistant director of CAHR. However, she said law enforcement agencies also are focusing on domestic minor sex trafficking and are finding that online social networks are being used for this kind of crime. As Thomas explained, traffickers are now searching for and reaching out to potential victims via platforms such as Facebook.

"Sex trafficking remains a scourge throughout Florida," Llovera said. "The Internet has become the new virtual street corner for much prostitution."

Human trafficking is also big business. Thomas said it is now the second largest illegal trade in the world, generating \$32 billion annually.

"Organized crime is going to continue to move to the trend toward human trafficking because it's so profitable, especially in rural areas where there isn't a lot of law enforcement training," Thomas said. "They're going to be able to thrive basically untouched."

THE CHALLENGE FOR CITIES

Awareness of human trafficking has increased and the State of Florida has made significant steps in attacking it. In 2012, the Legislature passed legislation strengthening laws against human trafficking. The Safe Harbor Act, which allows sex trafficking victims and children rescued from prostitution to receive help from child welfare professionals instead of being placed in juvenile delinquency, went into effect in 2013.

During the 2014 legislative session, the Legislature unanimously passed CS/CS/HB 7141, which builds on the Safe Harbor Act. It requires the Florida Department of Children and Families to adopt screening and assessment tools to help identify and serve sexually exploited children, and requires that staff working with these children receive specialized training. The bill also creates a Statewide Council on Human Trafficking within the Department of Legal Affairs. If signed by the governor, the bill will take effect July 1, 2014.

For municipalities, identifying and preventing human trafficking remains difficult. It is especially challenging in communities that may not have the resources of larger cities. The International City/County Management Association reports that perpetrators of human trafficking are increasingly looking to rural areas for their operations.

The Sobering Stats

- >> About 80 percent of all victims are female and half are children.
- >> Human trafficking generates approximately \$32 billion internationally every year
- >> 100,000 to 300,000 of human trafficking victims in the U.S. are girls between the ages of 11 and 17.

Source: Southwest Florida Regional Coalition Against Human Trafficking



- >> In Florida, the two sectors of the economy where forced labor appears most prevalent are the agriculture sector and the tourism and hospitality industries.
- >> At any given time, there are between 30,000 and 40,000 pre-teen and teenaged runaways in Florida, who are “tremendously vulnerable to exploitation by pimps or to abuses in the adult entertainment industry.”

Source: FSU Center for the Advancement of Human Rights

Thomas said the level of awareness tends to be lower in small cities as opposed to those in places such as the **Tampa Bay area, Orlando and Miami**, where law enforcement officers have more training and experience related to human trafficking. As Clearwater Police Chief Holloway explained, investigating human trafficking is highly “resources intense,” and it takes time to build a case.

“Also, I think it’s easier to operate labor camps in these rural cities where there are thousands and thousands of acres of land, and it’s difficult to identify where the trafficking is occurring,” he said.

“Generally people are looking in the major cities, and victims can slip through the cracks in rural towns.”

However, there are red flags. For example, barbed wire around a home could indicate a residence designed to keep people inside, like a prison, said Holloway. Employees in a restaurant might avoid conversations with patrons. A house where there appear to be parties every night with cars coming and going could be the site of sex trafficking.

Thomas cited an incident in which a flight attendant watched as a group of kids slept for an entire flight. After her

supervisor began asking questions of the man accompanying them, they determined the potential for international trafficking of the minors.

“It’s the little things that cause concern,” he said. “It’s not always what you picture a pimp to look like. You think he’s some guy on the street wearing a coat and hat. It could be someone who looks like a normal businessperson, or there’s the thought that it’s only males. But we’re finding out there are females . . . who offer jobs to young women and then exploit them.”

Quincy Chief of Police Walter McNeil, who is a member of the State of Florida



- >> An estimated **20.9 million people are trafficked for commercial sex or forced labor around the world**, according to the Polaris Project.
- >> The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) reported a **259-percent increase in calls between 2008 and 2012**, which it attributed to an increased awareness of human trafficking and its hotline number. Calls, emails and online tip forms in that timeframe represented **9,298 cases of potential human trafficking**. Of those cases, **64 percent involved sex trafficking, 22 percent involved labor trafficking and nearly 3 percent involved both**. The remaining were unspecified.
- >> **In 2011, the NHTRC ranked Florida third in the number of calls received by its hotline**. From January 1 to December 31, 2013, the NHTRC received 1,724 Florida calls. This also represented the third highest call volume of all 50 states and the District of Columbia that year.

Sources: The Polaris Project and the National Human Trafficking Resource Center

Human Trafficking Task Force, said there are subtle indicators that officers can look for when investigating issues that, at first, might not seem related to trafficking. One example is waiters or janitorial workers in hotels and motels refusing to make eye contact. If an officer has an encounter with the driver of a vehicle transporting a large group of people such as migrant workers, there could be much more than a routine traffic violation at play.

“What we’re asking the officers to do is not merely consider that just a traffic stop,” McNeil said. “Spend the time trying to make contact with the occupants of the vehicle to get more information.”

“Some of these persons may be in the United States undocumented, and so we’re trying to teach officers the sensitivity of it,” he continued. “We’re not there to try to enforce immigration laws. It’s trying to figure out if crimes are being committed against those persons while they are here.”

‘WHEN YOU START TURNING OVER THOSE ROCKS, YOU WILL FIND IT.’

Yaro Garcia, president of the Southwest Florida Regional Coalition Against Human Trafficking, said the **City of Bonita Springs** has been supportive of its efforts to raise awareness and educate residents through community events. That education extends to some of the area’s youngest citizens.

“The coalition has worked with groups of children in that area in teaching them what the (trafficking) recruitment process looks like and how to avoid it,” she said. “In Bonita Springs alone, we have had cases of minors being recruited right outside of school as they were walking home from classes.”

Since 2009, the coalition has provided services to more than 150 victims of human trafficking in surrounding counties.

In 2006, the Clearwater Police Department was awarded a Department of Justice (DOJ) grant to create the Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking. The task force is often cited as a one of the state’s models in identifying and rescuing victims, and it has

provided training for other law enforcement agencies throughout the state.

“Every law enforcement agency is strapped with budgets and manpower, and the only way we’re going to deal with this is by working together,” said one Clearwater undercover assignment sergeant who asked not to be named. “If a small agency asks for assistance or needs help with helping to solving a case, that’s what we have done. We can share our expertise.”

But the level of awareness wasn’t always as high as it is now. The sergeant said that it wasn’t until the creation of the task force that he had handled a human trafficking case.

“All of our human trafficking cases made by the task force were after we

received the (DOJ) funding,” he said. “It’s not because the cases weren’t here. We weren’t looking. When you start turning over those rocks, you will find it.”

He emphasized that no agency alone can fight trafficking, and that it takes teamwork between agencies to conduct investigations and provide victims with the range of services they need once they are rescued. The undercover sergeant said the stakes are too high for communities to leave human trafficking unchecked.

“You’re talking about our sons and daughters living in our own backyards,” he said. “This is happening right here. It could happen to someone that you love.”

Erika Peterman is a freelance writer. 

Resources for Cities

Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking, (727) 562-4917 or www.catfht.org/index.php/about-us. The website includes a variety of resources for law enforcement. In October 2006, the Clearwater Police Department received a Department of Justice grant to create the task force.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security Blue Campaign

In its efforts to combat human trafficking, the Department of Homeland Security’s Blue Campaign provides information on training and outreach, how traffickers operate, and victim assistance to help keep the public informed. In addition, the DHS is partnering with the National League of Cities in its campaign. The DHS will work with the National League of Cities to provide web-based training and public awareness material to NLC members. Visit <http://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/law-enforcement> for local law enforcement resources available through the DHS.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published a “First Aid Kit for Use by Law Enforcement First Responders in Addressing Human Trafficking” that is available at www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/humantrafficking/docs/TIP_1st_AidKit_English_V0981429.pdf.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a number of law enforcement resource links available on its website at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/rescue-restore-campaign-tool-kits

U.S. Department of Justice Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit at www.justice.gov/crt/about/crm/htpu.php

The **Florida Department of Children and Families Protections for Child Victims of Human Trafficking Information Kit** is available at www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/humantrafficking/docs/InformationKit.pdf