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Travel industry learns to spot human trafficking victims

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SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) -- As many as 300,000 American children are victims of human trafficking every year. Worldwide, the numbers are even higher and many are transported on commercial airlines. The travel industry may become a critical link in rescuing victims.

Petra Hensely was just 16 years old when she was kidnapped off a public street in the Czech Republic.

"I was drugged, beaten and raped by more men than I could count," Hensely said.

The kidnapers were human traffickers selling their victims for sex. After three days of unspeakable torture, Hensely jumped out a window and escaped.

Now, almost 20 years later, human trafficking is worse than ever and Hensely is telling her story, this time at San Francisco International Airport.

"I have a deep desire to help others escape from the monsters who are dealing with buying and selling human beings," Hensely said.

SFO was the first airport in the country to start training employees to recognize human trafficking - adults and children sold for sex, slave labor, even forced organ donations. It's happening everywhere, including the Bay Area.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-San Mateo, says human trafficking is now one of the largest and fastest growing criminal industries in the world.

"As drug cartels, they are realizing, 'Hey we can make more money or as much money selling young girls or young boys as we can selling dope,' and you can sell these youngsters over and over again, you can only sell drugs once," Speier said.

Incredibly, many victims are moved from place to place in plain sight on commercial airlines. They are often drugged or too terrified to ask for help.

So now there is a growing call to get airlines involved.

Air France was the first to step up with short in flight videos, graphic reminders that human trafficking is illegal in every country and sex with minors can lead to prison.

Starting this fall, Delta will become the first U.S. airline to train employees how to spot and report human trafficking. A non-profit called Airline Ambassadors is pushing other airlines to do the same.

"If airlines would train their crews, we could have hundreds of thousands of eyes and ears in the air, stopping what we see as the biggest human rights issue facing mankind," spokesperson Nancy Rivard said.

Airline Ambassadors is running a training class at the International Tour Management Institute in San Francisco. Future tour directors are learning to look for warning signs such as bruising, wounds, and maybe no or little eye contact. Some victims are even tattooed with bar codes. The students are told to gather information to report to authorities.

"Your location, what exactly is going on, what the victim and trafficker look like," Rivard said.

"Do not try to rescue, we are not in the business of rescuing and we are not professionals," Airline Ambassadors spokesperson Deborah Quigley said.

But professionals are available anytime. The Department of Homeland Security has a 24-hour tip line with highly trained specialists.

Airline Ambassadors know it works. In just one day a couple of years ago, members reported suspected human trafficking on four different commercial flights and they were correct in every

case.

"And in one of those cases it led to the bust of a trafficking ring in Boston and we saved 82 children," Rivard said.

That kind of result, and just an hour of training made a big impact on one group travel professionals.

"This has opened my eyes; I know that I have witnessed so many of these things before, but I didn't know how to handle it or what to do," tour management student Linda Blitstein said.

Others are learning too. Next month, Mineta San Jose International Airport will be training its employees to recognize and report human trafficking.

Speier is calling on all airlines to voluntarily start training employees on human trafficking and if they don't, she may consider legislation to encourage them.

Written and produced by Jennifer Olney

Homeland Security Tip Line

866-DHS-2-ICE (866-347-2423) (from United States, Mexico, and Canada)
802-872-6199 (from other locations around the globe)

To report tips online:

<http://www.ice.gov/exec/forms/hsi-tips/tips.asp>

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