

First step for human trafficking task force: Gauge the problem



4 HOURS AGO • BY JONATHAN EDWARDS / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

The upper crust of Nebraska's criminal justice system is trying to arm police officers, prosecutors and judges with training they can use to attack the nebulous problem of human trafficking.

An 18-member task force delivered a 60-page memo and training manual to the state Legislature last week, the first step toward figuring how many people are trafficked in Nebraska and what authorities have to do to stop it.

In its report, the task force said human trafficking occurs primarily in prostitution, pornography, farming and the drug trade. Victims include foreigners but also U.S. citizens — many of them runaways whom traffickers scoop up off the street.

Nebraska sees a lot of action with the sex trade, as with drugs, because Interstate 80 is a major conduit connecting the East and West coasts, said Al Riskowski, a task force member and executive director of the Nebraska Family Council. Criminals constantly are shuffling prostitutes across the country, and it's easy for human traffickers to cater to the needs of johns in Kearney, Grand Island or

Lincoln as they're passing through.

"We know we have a problem," Riskowski said.

But no one knows how big that problem is in Nebraska.

To get a handle on the scope of human trafficking, Riskowski said, the task force needs to define exactly what it is. Then they need to train people who come into contact with victims — police officers, doctors, judges — and have a chance to trace the strings back to the puppet masters.

Once they do, Riskowski said, authorities will start to see how big human trafficking is in Nebraska.

“This is an issue that is often disguised and rarely talked about. We're trying to uncover the extent of the problem.”

Members of the task force met recently with researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to sketch an outline of a study plumbing the depths of some areas of human trafficking. Riskowski said they probably will hone in on minors engaged in prostitution.

State Sen. Amanda McGill wrote the bill that eventually would create the task force and guide its purpose. When most people imagine “human trafficking,” they think about women from other countries who get smuggled into the United States and forced into the sex trade, but it’s much broader than that, McGill said.

Lincoln Police Chief Jim Peschong, a member of the task force, echoed McGill.

“When people hear about human trafficking, they think that happens in other countries, and not here in America, but it does happen here in America,” Peschong said.

Police officers and judges look at prostitutes and they see junkies who’ve chosen to break the law, but usually that’s not what’s happening, McGill said. Most of the time, there’s a pimp in the background or someone holding their immigration documents hostage.

The women are victims, not criminals, according to the human trafficking manual released by the commission.

“Nothing can really happen unless we get law enforcement and the judicial system to change how they view the women,” McGill said. “We need law enforcement and the judicial system to learn how to connect with these women and make them feel safe.”

Peschong said police officers haven’t done a good job of digging deeper into cases to find out whether there’s a person in the shadows imprisoning a farm worker when they’re not in the field or holding onto the passport and visa of a prostitute.

With training, they’ll know to probe deeper to not only see what’s happening on stage, but also behind the curtains.

“There just needs to be more education out there,” he said. “We need to identify and give a good definition (of human trafficking). What are we looking for? What is this? So we can all start looking at this with a critical eye.”

The first report is only the first step, McGill said. She said she plans to introduce legislation that would stiffen penalties on the johns who keep the illegal sex trade alive, and maybe outing them more publicly by plastering their faces on a website.

“The sex trade wouldn’t exist if they didn’t want to buy children and women,” McGill said.