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State Task Force Examines Prevalence of Human Trafficking in Alaska

By Abby Hancock

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Anchorage, Alaska

Human trafficking and sex trafficking occurs in Alaska but how often remains unclear, according to a recent study by a state task force. The report was compiled by a working group appointed by Gov. Sean Parnell in 2012. The five-month study examined the prevalence of human and sex trafficking and the available resources to victims.

The group heard input from a number of organizations and law enforcement agencies across the state with the goal to better understand the underground crime, described by Anchorage Police Department Sgt. Kathy Lacey as "hidden."

"You have to dig beneath the surface to find out that (it) actually is a sex trafficking case. So the cases don't self-present, they take a long time to uncover," said Lacey.

The report lists factors that put people at risk for human and sex trafficking, including poverty, young age, homelessness and a drug and alcohol addiction. Covenant House Alaska says many of those factors are shared by the population it serves.

"We're seeing more vulnerable kids and the population that traffickers prey on is vulnerable youth," said Lauren Rice, Director of Public Affairs and Advocacy at the shelter.

The non-profit has seen a steady increase over several years in sex trafficking victims and is now providing its staff with better training to be poised to identify and respond to it. There is an average of one case a month. Half of the youth at Covenant House are Alaska Native and are targeted by traffickers because they're able to pass as different nationalities, said Rice.

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"A lot of times the kids that are coming in from rural Alaska are already experiencing abuse and that's why they're leaving rural Alaska," said Rice. "So you see that they're prime for this type of victimization."

The study included 13 recommendations on how to better identify victims and raise more awareness on the issue. Robin Bronen, Executive Director of the Alaska Immigration Justice Project, says the state lacks social services that should be available to help victims.

"it's critical those sorts of services be provided so that law enforcement has the assistance of social service providers as they're going through a very intense criminal investigation and prosecution," said Bronen.

The Alaska Immigration Justice Project is the only agency in the state that assists victims of international trafficking. According to Bronen, one of the issues that often prevents victims from reporting the trafficking is the fear of being deported.

"Victims could have children born in the U.S. and be terrified of being separated from them. So immigration status and that fear of deportation means that those being trafficked internationally will keep underground so that they don't draw any attention to themselves," said Bronen.

The task force presented its findings to lawmakers in Juneau on Wednesday.

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