

Sheriff launches human trafficking prevention initiative

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SEBRING – Florida’s Attorney General Pam Bondi has spearheaded an educational and prevention initiative against Human Trafficking. In a press release on the Attorney General’s website, Attorney General Bondi was quoted saying, “January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness Month, and we must all do our part to raise awareness about this horrific crime and to find ways we can combat it.”

In coordination with this initiative, Sheriff Susan Benton is launching a local effort to educate the public on the local impact of this crime. In the coming weeks, deputies will be making personal visits to local pediatrician offices, hospital emergency rooms, shopping malls and other places frequented by youth, distributing posters and other materials designed to bring awareness of the ways they may become victims of human trafficking.

“Human traffickers recruit victims through various means, especially social media. They prey on our youth who are vulnerable and seek attention and approval. We need to use every tool at our disposal to keep our children safe from these predators,” Benton said.

Information on Human Trafficking prevention can be found on the Attorney General’s website, www.myfloridalegal.com. Some of the tips for parents listed there include the following:

Talk to your children about sex trafficking and sexual abuse

Restrict use of the computer to areas of the house where other family members are present

Know your child’s screen names and passwords so you can know who they have been communicating with online

Use the parental control settings on your computer to check Internet history and to control the sites your children have access to

Let your children know they can talk to you about anything that makes them uncomfortable

In addition to tips, the site also has a pledge that the child can sign as a reminder of their commitment to online safety.

Some of the signs that a person may be a victim of sex trafficking are unexplained signs of physical and sexual violence, behaviors indicating fear, anxiety or depression, evidence of controlling relationships or unexplained possession of expensive clothing, jewelry or other items.

If you suspect that a child is a victim of Human Trafficking call the Department of Children and Families at 1-800-96-ABUSE (1-800-962-2873), as this is considered a form of child abuse.

Depending upon the nature of the case, this phone call may initiate the process for investigation

from both DCF and the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Special Investigations Unit.

"The most important thing is that we become aware of this threat to our children and that we are willing to make the call and get assistance for these unsuspecting victims," Benton said.

For more information on this subject or to schedule a presentation on Human Trafficking, contact Nell Hays, CPS at 402-7369.

Posted in News on *Wednesday, February 12, 2014 8:00 am. Updated: 10:45 am.*

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