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Coalition discusses ways to stop human trafficking in area

By Michelle Dupler, Herald staff writer

RICHLAND -- Human trafficking isn't just a big city problem. It's everywhere -- including the Tri-Cities.

But a newly formed coalition led by Tri-City Soroptomist Clubs, and that includes police agencies, prosecutors and advocates, is starting to spread the message that there is something local residents can do about it.

The coalition had its first meeting Tuesday in Richland to talk about what human trafficking is and to brainstorm ways that grass-roots activism can combat a \$1 billion industry, third in the world only to illegal drug and weapons trafficking.

"It's happening to our own kids right under our noses," said State Sen. Jerome Delvin, R-Richland. "It's happening in our country, in our state and even right here in the Tri-Cities."

Human trafficking is in effect modern day slavery in which people -- including children -- are sold into forced labor, prostitution, debt bondage, or forced marriages through fraud or coercion.

It's been a crime in Washington since 2003, and the Legislature gradually has added more and more teeth to the state's anti-trafficking laws.

Just this year, the Legislature enacted a bill allowing police to record telephone calls involving underage victims when the victims give consent.

Benton County Prosecutor Andy Miller said during the meeting that bill gives police and prosecutors an important tool for convicting people engaging in the human trafficking trade.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome in battling human trafficking is one of awareness.

Richland Police Chief Chris Skinner likened burgeoning public awareness of human trafficking to the way attitudes toward domestic violence started to change a couple of decades ago.

In much the same way people once considered domestic violence a "family issue" rather than a crime, some people see forced sex trafficking as "victimless."

Delvin, a former longtime Richland police officer, said he recently had to set a radio talk show host straight about sex trafficking and explain that it's not just drug addicts selling themselves for a fix, or runaways on the streets.

"The greatest enemy in combating modern day slavery is ignorance," Delvin said.

Victims of human trafficking didn't choose to become victims, and they often are forced into drug addictions so they're easier to control, he said.

And far too often, they are kids. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates between 100,000 and 300,000 children in the United States become human trafficking victims each year.

"I have seen and heard a lot of things. Few have touched my heart -- saddened and angered me -- as much as the selling of our children," Delvin said.

To get involved with the Tri-Cities Coalition to Stop Human Trafficking, email sittricitie dmst@gmail.com.