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Erie nuns fight human trafficking in Super Bowl city

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Nuns from Erie wrote to hotels in this year's Super Bowl host city, asking them to help keep women and children safe from sex this weekend.

Local Sisters of St. Joseph, Benedictine Sisters and Sisters of Mercy supported the writing campaign to Indianapolis-area hotels and motels in an effort to fight trafficking and prostitution.

"It's known that at large sporting events, ... there is an increase in (sex) trafficking," said Sister Mary Claire Kennedy, social justice coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Kennedy, along with representatives of Sisters of St. Joseph congregations in Philadelphia and Baden, sent 220 letters nearly three weeks before Sunday's big game.

"With Super Bowl 2012 scheduled to take place in Indianapolis, ... the probability of sex trafficking in your city will

increase significantly," the sisters wrote.

Sisters said human trafficking, which includes the transporting of women and children to be sexually exploited, increases in places hosting big male-dominated events like the Super Bowl.

Motels and hotels can help protect those women and children by being aware of the crime of human trafficking, training employees to recognize the signs of it, and reporting it, sisters said.

"Hotels have an important role to play in keeping your guests safe and the reputation of your city and region," the Erie, Baden and Philadelphia sisters wrote. "Therefore, we ask that as you prepare for the overflow of guests into Indianapolis, the safety of young girls and young women who will be trafficked into your city be a priority for you."

Doing so also has benefits for the lodging places.

"By taking action to eradicate human trafficking, including the sexual exploitation of children, your hotel can signal your commitment to human rights," the Sisters of St. Joseph wrote. "At the same time, all who use your services will feel comfortable knowing your commitment against this awful crime."

A few days after the Sisters of St. Joseph communities sent the joint letter, sisters and associates from Erie sent about 225 postcards, Kennedy said.

Women from two other religious congregations here added their support to the effort.

Ninety letters were sent by local Sisters of Mercy and people they recruited to write to hotels or the governor of Indiana.

Sister Natalie Rossi, leader of the Mercy community in Erie, said the handwritten letters were mostly a single sentence asking the recipient to help stop sex trafficking during the Super Bowl and afterward.

"Very short and to the point," she said, describing the letters.

Individual Benedictine Sisters of Erie sent letters as well.

That congregation made a sample letter available for people who wanted to write to hotels, motels, the chamber of commerce or the governor.



Sister Mary Claire Kennedy, social justice coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania, was photographed at the Sisters of St. Joseph administrative offices in Millcreek Township on Dec. 1, 2011. ROB ENGELHARDT//ERIE TIMES-NEWS

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Sister Marlene Bertke included information on the Erie Benedictines for Peace blog and said 90 people asked for the sample letter.

Kennedy said it's still sometimes hard to convince people that human trafficking, a 21st century form of slavery with millions of victims, is a problem in the United States.

"We can bring attention to it," she said.

DANA MASSING can be reached at 870-1729 or by e-mail.

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