

Human trafficking gains notice

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RALEIGH -- The Salvation Army of Wake County has hired two people to work with victims of a crime few would associate with the Triangle: human trafficking.

They're part of a growing network of law enforcement and nonprofit groups that are becoming more sophisticated about dealing with a worldwide problem that experts say exists in North Carolina. Victims of human trafficking include minors involved in the sex trade, as well as adults coerced or deceived into prostitution or forced to work without pay or against their will.

"It could be one of the women who comes into our shelter, or someone who goes to the police for domestic violence," said Salvation Army spokeswoman Haven Sink. "It could be anyone and could be anywhere."

The Salvation Army workers - one full-time, one part-time - will act as advocates for the suspected victims of human trafficking, assessing their needs and ensuring they get help. That could include arranging to see a doctor or meet with an attorney, as well as basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

The Raleigh office of the Salvation Army is following the lead of the national organization, which has made human trafficking a priority, Sink said. Until recent years, human trafficking wasn't treated as a distinct crime.

It became a crime under federal law in 2000 and a state crime in 2006. According to statistics compiled by the state, about two dozen people had been charged with human trafficking statewide through 2010, including a 30-year-old Durham man accused of holding a 15-year-old girl captive for more than 18 months and forcing her to have sex.

Human trafficking isn't new to North Carolina, but the attention to it is, said Capt. Chris Carrigan of the Raleigh Police Department. Carrigan likens it to domestic violence in the 1990s - an age-old problem that got a new name along with fuller attention from nonprofit groups, politicians and law enforcement agencies.

"In the past, if you had a juvenile involved in prostitution, it would be written up as a prostitution case. But

Human Trafficking Hotline

The Polaris Project operates a national toll-free hotline where people can report cases of human trafficking around the clock. Where appropriate, callers to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center will be connected with local law enforcement agencies or other local agencies and programs that can assist.

For more information about the hotline or human trafficking, go to polarisproject.org. For more about human trafficking in North Carolina, go to humantrafficking.unc.edu.

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it's actually human trafficking," Carrigan said.

The distinction is more than semantic. Prostitution violations are generally treated as misdemeanors, Carrigan said, while human trafficking charges are felonies, with stiffer penalties.

"In general, prostitution is seen as a voluntary thing," he said. "Whereas with human trafficking, they are doing it through force, fraud or coercion."

Carrigan serves on the board of the N.C. Coalition Against Human Trafficking, an 8-year-old association of law enforcement, legal and social services organizations, including the Salvation Army, that works on behalf of victims. Among other things, the coalition has pressed for mandatory human trafficking training for new law enforcement officers statewide, a new requirement this year.

North Carolina has many of the ingredients that attract traffickers, said Donna Bickford, director of the Carolina Women's Center in Chapel Hill and an active member of the coalition. These include military bases, a strong tourism industry, regular influx of immigrant and low-wage workers used by agriculture and other industries, and major highway connections to the rest of the East Coast.

"Just like drugs move up and down I-95, so do people," Bickford said.

The prevalence of human trafficking is hard to quantify. It's thought that in many cases, the crime is simply not reported because victims are afraid to come forward.

At the same time, many law enforcement and government agencies don't track it. While the state Department of Labor tracks complaints about workers not getting paid minimum wage, for example, its records don't account for cases of human trafficking.

Still, reports of human trafficking are becoming more common, either because the problem is getting worse or because attention to it has grown. A national human trafficking hotline operated by the nonprofit Polaris Project received 11,874 calls in 2010, more than double the number two years earlier.

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