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Fairview Heights seminar focuses on human trafficking of sex slaves, forced laborers

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By CAROLYN P. SMITH — News-Democrat

Human trafficking of sex slaves and forced laborers often goes unreported or unnoticed, and U.S. Attorney Stephen Wigginton said the public needs to know it could be happening in metro-east communities.

Wigginton describes human trafficking as "modern day slavery."

In 2010, human trafficking was a \$34 billion business worldwide. Victims often are smuggled through Mexico or Asia or on a ship to work as a forced laborer, Wigginton said.

Suzanne Garrison, chief of the criminal division with the U.S. Attorney's Office in the metro-east, said while there have been some human trafficking cases prosecuted in Missouri, "We typically have not been referred a lot of cases."

But that does not mean there are no cases on the Illinois side of the river.

"We think the information is not being reported or it's being overlooked. These are crimes done in secret," Garrison said.

That's why the U.S. Attorney's Office is hosting a human trafficking seminar 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Wednesday at Grace Church at 5151 N. Illinois St. in Fairview Heights. It is free and open to the public.

Wigginton said the seminar is designed to raise awareness about human trafficking and to give people information about how to report suspected cases of human trafficking.

An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked annually across the world, Wigginton said. Also, it is estimated that 18,000 to 20,000 people are trafficked into the United States each year.

There are many reasons that the crime goes unreported or unnoticed. For instance, some individuals who are being held against their will have a language barrier and can't tell anyone what is happening to them. Or, they may be in the United States with no money or identification and don't have a way to contact any of their family.

Victims may be told that their family members back home will be harmed if they do not cooperate. And in some cases, the individuals think they will be injured or they'll be deported or even face criminal prosecution if the work they've been doing is found out.

Some of the individuals may come from Third World countries where their criminal system is corrupt so they do not have any faith that they will get justice if they told law enforcement.

"They're used to a corrupt systems they are afraid to go to law enforcement," said Monica Stump, human trafficking coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the metro-east.

People are not aware that someone in bondage could be their neighbor. Wigginton said a perfect example was the Shawn Hornbeck case in Missouri in which Hornbeck was allowed to walk around the neighborhood and play with children and yet he was being held emotionally, for four years, by his captor.

"He was held against his will by emotional restraint," Wigginton said.

In sex trafficking, individuals are recruited and transported for prostitution. And in most cases, "the victims almost always deny their condition because they've been brainwashed," Stump said.

In labor trafficking, victims are subjected to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery, Stump said.

People in this situation can never really pay off a debt because the sole goal of the person who is holding the victim is to keep them to make money. Their captors can charge them room and board, for food, or whatever they decide to affix a fee to, in order that they can keep them in bondage, Stump said. Some of the victims are put to work on farms.

Both sex and labor trafficking are federal violations. To prosecute them there has to be "proof of force, fraud or coercion," Wigginton said.

However, if the victim is a child, Wigginton said federal law does not require proof of force, fraud or coercion. The mere fact that the victim is a child allows federal prosecutors to charge the individual and seek conviction. No one under 18 years old can consent to prostitution, and can not be prosecuted for the crimes, Stump said.

Labor trafficking is punishable by no more than 20 years in a federal jail cell, a \$250,000 fine and restitution. If the victim is a minor, federal law provides for a sentence that is no less than 10 years in prison, a fine and mandatory restitution.

If the victim of sex trafficking is an adult or a minor who was subjected to force, fraud, or coercion, the offense is punishable by no less than 15 years to life, a fine, and mandatory imprisonment.

Stump said eight in 10 cases last year were classified as sex trafficking while one in 10 were classified as labor trafficking across the nation.

The United States is a destination country for many involved in human trafficking because of the many benefits that the U.S. has to offer.

People take the huge risk of going to jail because there's a lot of money in human trafficking.

"That human being, unlike drugs, can be sold over and over again. That person never goes away until they can get more," Wigginton said.

A lot of people who want to come to the United States because of better opportunities will allow themselves to be put to work by a smuggler, Stump said. But, the person always plans to work off his debt and start a new life but smugglers won't ever let that to happen because the individual is his product -- the moneymaker, Stump said.

"They're brought here to work and are told they have to pay off their debt. They are forced to perform sexual acts to pay for their food, bed, housing or whatever they are told they have to pay for. They get charged for

everything they use," Stump said. "The trafficker could be a housekeeper or a wealthy doctor," she said.

Boys as young as six or nine, are thrust into prostitution because of trafficking and girls usually are between 12 to 13 years old.

"Our office has been very proactive in trying to educate and raise public awareness on human trafficking," Wigginton said. "We've sponsored three seminars in a six-month period. We want everyone to know that our office has zero tolerance for these types of crimes. Human trafficking is a crime against humanity and basic human rights."

Contact reporter Carolyn P. Smith at 618-239-2503.

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