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UPDATE: Maine Conference Examines Human Trafficking

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Maine law enforcement officials say now is the time to address the problem before it gets any worse.

Human trafficking is a problem that may be largely unseen by the general public but it is present in Maine. That's the message of a two-day conference on the subject that opened in Auburn today, where law enforcement and social service agencies are trying to raise more awareness about the issue.

"I think we all recognize we are at the precipice of something that can get much worse if we don't address it early on," says Dan Perry, an assistant U.S. attorney for Maine. "The slogan of this symposium is 'not here.' The unfortunate reality is, it is here."

Perry says human trafficking usually involves sex and labor trafficking, where vulnerable people perform services induced by force, fraud or coercion for the benefit of someone else. He says numbers of cases are difficult to gather because victims are often reluctant to report the crimes.

Auburn Police Chief Phil Crowell says Maine is among several states that do not include human trafficking in the criminal code. Crowell says law enforcement and other agencies will push for its addition as a crime in Maine.

He says Maine currently only addresses four of 10 categories considered necessary for identifying the problem and protecting victims who often wind up getting charged themselves.

"We really need to be incorporating safe harbor, we need to be focusing on the human trafficking itself, sexual exploitation, victim rights," Corwell says. "If our response to a victim is, 'The best response we can provide is to arrest you,' it's the wrong statement that we need to be making to our victims."

The conference's keynote speaker, Minh Dang, was scheduled to tell her personal story regarding trafficking today, but her plane flight was delayed. Her speech has been rescheduled for tomorrow.

The conference continues at Auburn City Hall tomorrow with workshops, Minh Dang's keynote address, and a rally at 5:00. For more information about the conference, [click here](#).

This story was reported by Susan Sharon.

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