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Efforts to stop sex trafficking continue despite lack of statistics



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Local group says victims’ services are badly needed

BY HEIDI R. KINCHEN
Florida Parishes bureau
January 06, 2013

9 COMMENTS

Judging by the “End Human Trafficking” billboards and the work of a Baton Rouge-based anti-trafficking group building a shelter in Livingston Parish, sex trafficking is a significant problem in south Louisiana.

Local experts insist victims’ services are desperately needed; nevertheless, reliable statistics on the full extent of the problem remain elusive.

“A lot of people think trafficking doesn’t happen in Louisiana or in Baton Rouge, but it does,” said Lee Domingue, co-founder with his wife, Laura, of the awareness organization Trafficking Hope, which is building the

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Trafficking
hotline calls
n NATION
2011 19,427
2012 (Jan-Sept) 15,362
n Louisiana
2011 161
2012 (Jan-Sept) 176
n Baton Rouge
2011 38
2012 (Jan-Sept) 43
n New Orleans
2011 29
2012 (Jan-Sept) 31
n Lafayette
2011 6
2012 (Jan-Sept) 14
Source: National Human
Trafficking Resource Center

RESOURCES

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Maps listing homicides or
suspected homicides in
EBR Parish for 2011 and
2010.

shelter in rural Livingston Parish. “And it happens in north Baton Rouge, in south Baton Rouge and in areas you wouldn’t think, but it happens under the surface.”

Louisiana law defines sex trafficking as the inducement of a commercial sex act from an adult by force, fraud or coercion, or from a minor irrespective of force, fraud or coercion. Transporting the victim is not required for a violation of the law; facilitating the sex act or benefiting, financially or otherwise, from it is enough to trigger a violation.

The term “trafficking” and its description as “modern-day slavery” can be misleading for both victims and the public, said Judy Benitez, executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault.

“It puts the image in our heads of girls being physically restrained or handcuffed or put in a cage, but that is usually not the case,” she said. “Usually it’s more akin to a domestic violence situation where ... they could leave, but there are a variety of factors making them unwilling to do so.”

Those factors include threats of harm, intimidation, bullying, blackmail and coerced or forced drug use to the point of addiction and dependence, Benitez said.

Homeless and runaway youth are particularly vulnerable: One 15-year-old girl who had run away from a group home was rescued at a Baton Rouge hotel in February 2011 after she called a family member to report that a man she had met on the streets had forced her to provide sexual services for men who responded to an ad posted on the Internet, Baton Rouge police had reported at the time.

Sex trafficking is happening in the suburbs and rural areas as well, said Blair Edwards, juvenile court judge for the 21st Judicial District, which covers Livingston, Tangipahoa and St. Helena parishes.

Edwards said she has seen at least two cases of suspected sex trafficking of minors in Livingston and Tangipahoa parishes.

“There are many others out there that we believe we’re dealing with, but we haven’t been able to really verify that this is the case,” she said.

Although the girls do not admit to having been trafficked, Edwards said, the signs are unmistakable.

“It just stood out to me when we had a 15-year-old girl, for example, test positive for cocaine and had been a runaway for several weeks,” Edwards said.

“If a child has been missing, or has run away for a month or two, you know somebody is taking care of that child and you start to ask questions about who that person is and why,” she said.

“Then if you find the child has gone to Tennessee or Florida or Alabama, has crossed state lines, those are things that really raise eyebrows.”

Documenting the cases

Nationwide, task forces funded through the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 opened 2,515 suspected incidents of human trafficking for investigation between January 2008 and June 2010,

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Southern Sports

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according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

In fiscal year 2010, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the U.S. Department of Justice filed charges in 71 cases of sex trafficking against 113 defendants and secured 85 convictions.

In the Baton Rouge and New Orleans metro areas, more than 100 minors were identified as victims of sex trafficking between 2006 and 2008, according to a 2008 report by Shared Hope International, a Vancouver, Wash.-based nonprofit that works toward the eradication of sex trafficking.

Since 2009, the Rescue and Restore Coalition of Louisiana has identified another 140 victims, mostly from the Baton Rouge and New Orleans metro areas, said Gena Bohl, public awareness coordinator for Trafficking Hope.



[Show caption](#)

Trafficking Hope spokeswoman Molly Venzke declined The Advocate's request to be put in contact with a trafficking victim willing to speak about the experience.

"We cannot offer that, especially because we haven't been able to put

someone through the process of 18 months of restoration," she said, adding that it would be exploitative to do an interview with the newspaper at this point.

Katherine Green, chairwoman of the Louisiana Human Trafficking Task Force for the Middle District, said identifying and documenting victims has been a problem across the country.

"When the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was enacted, the focus was on international victims or those abroad, not on victims here in the U.S.," Green said. "It wasn't until the 2003 and 2005 reauthorizations of the act that emphasis was added to broaden the focus to include domestic human trafficking."

The lack of data held up a 2011 reauthorization of the federal act because, as U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, noted in committee, without more precise numbers, the government cannot determine whether funding to fight trafficking has been effectively spent.

Grassley said in comments attached to the bill that in the five years since a 2006 Government Accountability Office noted the U.S. government had no effective mechanism for estimating the number of victims, "there has been no improvement in the government's ability to quantify the data."

Green said the U.S. Department of Justice is urging non-governmental organizations and others who come into contact with potential trafficking victims to start collecting data.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline, (888) 373-7888, also has been collecting data, logging 19,427 calls nationwide in

2011, including 578 crisis calls reporting a threat of imminent danger or harm to a trafficking victim at the time of the call, according to an annual call center report.

In the first nine months of 2012, the hotline logged 176 calls from Louisiana, including 43 from Baton Rouge, 31 from New Orleans and 14 from Lafayette. Thirty-nine of the calls were from unknown or unspecified locations.

Fifteen of the calls specifically referenced potential cases of sex trafficking, seven of which were said to involve pimp-controlled activities, while another five involved sex trafficking controlled by family members.

Misconceptions

Experts said the documented numbers of trafficking victims are only the tip of the iceberg because of an unwillingness by many victims to seek help and because of public misconceptions about the problem.

“Sex trafficking victims are easily manipulated by their traffickers and have mixed emotions, often believing they love the person,” Green said. “They don’t see themselves as victims at all because it’s a different normality they’ve had to survive.”

In one case, a victim would not willingly testify against her trafficker because she insisted he had treated her well, Green said.

“The prosecutor asked her, ‘How did he treat you well? What did he ever do for you?’ and she answered, ‘He bought me a hamburger at McDonald’s once,’” Green said. “Their sense of normal is just that warped because of everything they’ve been through.”

Many sex trafficking victims have been abused from a very young age, many sexually abused at home, said Benitez, with the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault.

“They have been taught their body is not their own, that they’re not able to make decisions for themselves and only people in power can make those decisions,” Benitez said. “They don’t feel they can say no.”

The reluctance of victims to testify can be frustrating for law enforcement officers who want to get traffickers off the streets and guide victims to the services they need, said Bobby Gaston, special programs manager with the Louisiana Sheriffs Association.

“Trafficking cases are extremely difficult to prove because a lot of it has to do with intent,” Gaston said. “Many of the cases we thought were trafficking turned out to be prostitution because we couldn’t prove they were being forced. A lot of times we suspected they were, but they were so deathly afraid of their ‘johns’ (the purchasers) or traffickers (the pimps) that they wouldn’t give us good (information).”

Although cases of adult sex trafficking by law require evidence of force, fraud or coercion, he said, no such element of intent is required in cases involving minors, who are presumed incapable of giving consent.

Supply and demand

Sex trafficking would not exist if there were not a market for sexually

exploited individuals, the experts said.

“Everything for sale has to have a market of people willing to buy, and that has never been a problem in this realm,” Benitez said. “But nobody wants to talk about that.”

People may be tempted to blame the victim in commercial sex cases, rather than hold the trafficker responsible, Benitez said.

“Some (prostitutes) go into this willingly and if given the option would not make any different choices, but far more are trapped and either unable to leave or unaware of what else to do to keep body and soul together to support their kid or their habit,” she said.



Show caption

In Livingston Parish, Hope House, the cabin retreat on a secluded 32-acre tract, will open its gates this spring to 14 women who will be paired in seven cabins lining a field that overlooks what will become a large pond. The grounds include an administration and intake building, cafeteria, learning center and other gathering spaces.

Services provided will include emotional and vocational counseling and education during the women’s 12- to 18-month stay, Domingue said. Medical services will be provided by off-site professionals.

The facility is being built through donations of money, labor and supplies from individuals and businesses, which have provided tile flooring, plumbing and mattresses, among other things, he said.

Women will be referred to the shelter by law enforcement and other non-governmental organizations that work with victims of commercial sexual exploitation, Domingue said.

Trafficking Hope receives federal funding through Healing Place Serve, a nonprofit organization that grew out of Healing Place Church in Baton Rouge but is a separate entity.

Healing Place Serve received a \$239,750 grant for the 2012-13 fiscal year, one of 11 Rescue & Restore grants across the country totaling \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help identify and assist trafficking victims in the U.S.

Trafficking Hope was awarded \$45,658 of that funding for public awareness and education, including billboards, said Bohl, the group’s public awareness coordinator.

Venzke, the group’s spokeswoman, said the grant makes up a small portion of its funding, which consists primarily of donations. None of the grant funds were used to support Hope House, she said.

Meanwhile, Domingue said, law enforcement and service organizations are gearing up to respond to the influx of commercial sex activity they believe will inevitably accompany the Super Bowl in New Orleans on Feb. 3.

Trafficking Hope has reached out to area hotels and truck stops to provide information on how to spot and report potential sex trafficking activities.

Domingue said he supports the idea of “john schools,” where men who purchase sexual favors would learn more about the damaging effects on the women involved.

Education and awareness among all community groups is key, Green said.

“So many things are scary in this world, and this is just one more thing to be wary of,” she said. “But if there is a good thing about this crime, it’s that with education and awareness anyone can identify it and report it to the hotline or a local law enforcement officer.”

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Comments (9)

- 1) Comment by Chucky - 01/06/2013
So you can not get \$ to stop prostitution so you call it Human Trafficking, as i said it is a name game and i can carve out a little area for more social services and help get tax dollars (and donations) for this "New" problem.
- 2) Comment by Mygulfbleedsforu - 01/06/2013
I wish I had a good feeling about this program, but I have serious doubts. Rocky noggin brought up one reason why, andzealer99 brings up another. Mr. Domingue's Healing Place Church connections and his insistence that he knows these women are coerced and need rescuing leave me just a little unsettled. Religious nutballism can be every bit as life-ruining as any number of other behaviors and programs. I'm thinking of "praying away the gay" and other religious bootcamp operations. I just dunno This operation might be as scary as a woman coerced into prostitution. If we are dealing with an underage victim, he/she should be in publicly funded and operated care. Also, with this being privately funded, will this organization pick and choose its victims carefully?
- 3) Comment by zealer99 - 01/06/2013
Forced servitude and rape is something to fight but it needs to be legitimate . Trying to convince people that they were abused sounds like the suppressed memory racket of years past that ruined a lot of lives as people realized that false memories were composed for them. We cannot afford to go off on another false cause that ruins more lives needlessly. There are victims that are in need of assistance and whose needs go unfilled (in fact funding for those programs is being cut as we debate), we should care for them first and use that as an example that they can trust the "system" because until then, they can't.
- 4) Comment by bourbon-soda - 01/06/2013

"Victims' services are badly needed" is unintentional, right?

5) Comment by ABayouBoy - 01/06/2013

Looks to be a great program for the unwilling victims of sexual abuse.

6) Comment by Chucky - 01/06/2013

Ok it is a name game

7) Comment by Chucky - 01/06/2013

****Comment Removed for Violation of Terms of Use****

8) Comment by Cousin Dave - 01/06/2013

****Comment Removed for Violation of Terms of Use****

9) Comment by rockynoggin - 01/05/2013

This looks like a solution in search of a problem. When I saw the name associated with this article the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention. I don't know this person but there's enough of an odor coming from him to make me wonder why he's so very interested in white slavery. Good job Advocate!

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