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CITY & REGION

New campaign aims to help local victims of human trafficking



“Those posters are beneficial. Maybe they’ll take a second look and say, ‘Yes, I’m strong enough to get help.’ ” FBI Agent Tina Taylor, speaking of posters and billboards like this one, above, at 1712 Main St. in Buffalo Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

By Phil Fairbanks | News Staff Reporter | @PhilFairbanksBN | Google+

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The survivors, the ones who are damaged but make it out alive, are the ones we know of, the ones we can track and monitor.

By all accounts, there are 400 of them, mostly women and young girls who over the past six years escaped the world of human trafficking in Western New York.

The numbers strike many as surprisingly large, but they are no surprise to the police and social workers who deal firsthand with the prostitution and forced labor that enslave victims who end up here.

To them, the 400 survivors are an indication of how big the problem is and how many victims are still out there.

“It’s a severely under-reported problem,” said Amy Fleischauer, director of victim services at the [International Institute of Buffalo](#). “The numbers are lower than what I know the problem to be.”

Four hundred victims in six years. Law enforcement experts say that as big as those numbers sound and as much as they speak to the good work of police and victim advocates, they don’t begin to tell the whole story.

They don’t explain why Western New York is a hotbed for trafficking or why so many survivors refuse to seek help.

“We want people to know, ‘If you see something, say something,’ ” said Elizabeth Fildes, an Erie County sheriff’s deputy and a member of the Human Trafficking Task Force and Alliance, a coalition of law enforcement groups.

Eager to find those who have slipped through the cracks, local experts are embarking on an effort to raise awareness about human trafficking.

Billboards and bus shelter posters with photos of young girls and messages such as “I am not for sale” and “Modern day slavery. Still just as barbaric” have started popping up across the region.

Signs also will go up in shelters, emergency rooms and anywhere else a human-trafficking victim is likely to end up in need of assistance.

It’s all part of a campaign designed to improve how law enforcement and social service agencies find and assist the hundreds, maybe thousands, of victims still out there.

The campaign is geared, not only to victims and the people who know them, but also to law enforcement officers who might not be trained in what or who to look for.

They are the ones, after all, who often have that first contact, knowing or unknowing, with a victim.

“Our hope is that the agents or officers on the ground are receiving enough training,” said Carol Dankert-Maurer, Erie County’s social services commissioner. “What we’re trying to build is sustainable knowledge.”

The county has made human trafficking a priority in recent years and, with the help of a state grant, one of five awarded in New York, is making an effort to find more victims, ideally before they end up arrested or jailed.

The obstacles in the way are many, and they all contribute to the difficulty in prosecuting human-trafficking cases.

Without a cooperating victim, it is extremely difficult to make a sexual or labor exploitation case, investigators say.

A lot of victims, especially those from foreign cultures, are reluctant to come forward because of a fear of the police or government. Others are simply unaware that what they’re going through is a federal crime.

“A lot of them are afraid to come forward,” said Jenny Amo, an FBI special agent with the Violent Crimes Against Children Squad in Buffalo. “Some of them have been told they’ll be deported if they come forward.”

Amo, who has been involved in several trafficking cases, isn’t surprised at all by the number of victims helped by the International Institute.

Neither is FBI Agent Tina Taylor. If anything, she and Amo view the numbers as low.

What both of them hope will come out of the campaign is a greater awareness by victims and police – and with that, more cooperation in prosecuting the men and, yes women, who are the traffickers.

“Those posters are beneficial,” said Taylor, a special agent with the Violent Crimes Against Children Squad. “Maybe they’ll take a second look and say, ‘Yes, I’m strong enough to get help.’”

The human-trafficking problem in Western New York is not confined to young Asian girls forced into prostitution.

“I can’t overstate the diversity of cases we’ve worked on,” said Fleischauer.

The survivors can come from brothels and massage parlors. But they also can come from farms, restaurants, fairs and private homes.

And they come from across the world.

About half of the 400 victims helped by the International Institute came from Mexico, but the other half was spread out among 16 different countries, including China, Thailand, Kenya and Peru.

They also come from the United States as well.

But why do they end up here in Western New York?

“We have all the red flags,” said Fildes.

Buffalo’s status as a cross-border community has made it a popular way station for traffickers moving victims from Canada to the U.S.

The region also has a large transient population and, because of its unusual combination of large urban centers and vast rural areas, it provides a lot of opportunities for traffickers involved in sexual and labor exploitation.

New York officials cited those risk factors in awarding Erie County one of only five human trafficking grants across the state.

“Human trafficking is a hidden crime,” said Amo, the FBI agent. “A lot of victims, especially international victims, don’t even know they’re being victimized.”

The hope is that this ongoing push for increased awareness will shed some light on Western New York’s hidden crime.

email: pfairbanks@buffnews.com