

Officials work to raise awareness of human trafficking

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Prosecuting prostitution charges and other misdemeanor offenses in Municipal Court gave Pat McNamara a look at life on the streets. In hindsight, though, he realized that many of those people were likely victims of human trafficking.

“I didn’t know. I look back and say that I didn’t see the signs,” McNamara told a conference of more than 170 Mississippi social workers and judges gathered Aug. 13 at the Fifth Annual Indian Child Welfare Act Conference at Choctaw, Mississippi.

Signs that a youth may be a sex trafficking victim include homelessness, a history of being a runaway, a juvenile record of truancy, and drug or alcohol abuse, said Victoria Sweet, program attorney for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in Reno, Nevada. Multiple STDs, bruises or other signs of physical trauma, withdrawn behavior, depression, anxiety, fear, hunger or malnutrition may be signals that a person may be a victim. A significantly older boyfriend or male travel companion may be a tipoff.

McNamara, a Special Assistant Attorney General in the Bureau of Victim Assistance, and Sweet aimed to raise awareness about human trafficking, educate the people who are likely to come into contact with victims and help the community begin to formulate a plan to address human trafficking.

Police, Youth Courts and social workers are among those likely to encounter victims of human trafficking. An estimated 50 to 80 percent of victims of human trafficking were involved with child welfare services at some point, Sweet said.

Other risk factors that make people vulnerable include poverty; limited education; lack of work opportunities; drug or alcohol addiction; physical, mental or emotional challenges; previous sexual abuse; PTSD; truancy; and being a runaway, thrown away or homeless.

Native Americans are at higher risk. “Indian Country does have challenges that we don’t see in other areas,” said Sweet, who is Native American and a frequent lecturer on violence against native women, intergenerational trauma and human trafficking. Tribal youth are two and a half times more likely to experience trauma from exposure to violence, and tribal children experience PTSD at a rate of 22 percent, the same rate as combat veterans and triple the rate of the general population.

“Every community needs to be concerned,” Sweet said. “We need to start asking some tough questions within our own communities about how we are going to deal with this risk.”

“We must be collaborating together if we want to be dealing with the crime of human trafficking,” Sweet said. “It’s hidden. It’s secretive.”

Victims are unlikely to come forward on their own. They may be loyal to the traffickers. That kind of loyalty means that some victims, when taken into custody by law enforcement, may attempt to recruit for their trafficker in jails or juvenile detention centers.

McNamara is coordinator for the Mississippi Human Trafficking Act. He is the point person to receive all reports of suspected human trafficking in Mississippi. He may be reached at 601-359-6766.

“We are in our infancy getting started on this,” he said. “I’m a bit short on experience, but I have all the enthusiasm in the world because I begged for this job.”

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