January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month

By Valorie Brecht

Human trafficking, a form of modern-day slavery, remains one of the greatest evils of our time. Every year since 2010, the president has dedicated the month of January to raising awareness about human trafficking and educating the public about how to identify and prevent this crime. Part of that includes knowing the facts.

Globally, an estimated 24.9 million people are subjected to human trafficking, which generates an estimated $150 billion annually in illicit profits.

In 2020, 11,193 situations of human trafficking were identified through the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline. Ninety-seven of those cases were in Wisconsin, which was the 28th highest number of cases of any state.

Human trafficking involves exploiting a person for labor, services or commercial sex. The Department of Justice defines sex trafficking as “a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” and labor trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.”

“Human trafficking takes place in almost all of our communities. It is like domestic violence was 15 years ago, in the sense that it was just not reported, but now is being reported more,” he said.

“Just like domestic vio-

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Trafficking
From Front Page

We don’t hear about the domestic violence that happens every day, only if it’s reported. He pointed out that the calls to the trafficking hotline likely only represent a fraction of the total cases, as many cases are never reported. The key word is “reportable.” The number of reported cases is on the rise because of more awareness and education, and because victims themselves understand there are places they can go.”

“The goal now is to increase the number of pros-
cutions.”

He said that there is often a lag between uncovering suspicions of human trafficking, verifying those sus-
picions and filing a case, and sometimes cases never get filed.

“Between 2010 and 2011 was the first successfully prosecuted human trafficking case. It was monumental, but also surprising because human trafficking had been taking place for years before that,” he said.

Human trafficking can take many forms. The top industries where labor trafficking occurs include domestic work, agriculture, traveling sales, and restaurants/food services. Sex trafficking most often happens in these industries: massage/spa, pornography, resident-based commercial sex, and hotels and motels.

Ritcherson said that in central Wisconsin, one of the most common types of trafficking is labor trafficking related to the agriculture industry. He reported that 69% of those who are labor trafficked are Hispanic or Latino, and the majori-
ty of migrant workers are Hispanic or Latino, so it made sense for UMOS to direct focused efforts to pre-
venting trafficking in that population.

“Labor traffickers tend to focus on migrant farm work-
ers and H-2A [temporary agriculture] workers recruit-
ed from outside the U.S. H-2A visa terms dictate that you can only work for one employer and the employer must provide food and lodging. So the employee is total-
ly at the mercy of the recruit-
er who brought them in. I’m certainly not saying that all farm owners are labor traffickers. But I am saying that the situation lends itself for labor trafficking to occur, especially during this tight labor market.”

Some of the hallmark signs are: the trafficker restrict-
ning the worker’s freedom of movement, withholding wages, withholding iden-
tification, using threats or intimidation, issuing fraudu-
 lent debt that the worker can never pay off, or physically or sexually assaulting the worker.

Of the victims of forced labor trafficking, more than half are men.

Signs of sex trafficking include the victim not being allowed to be speak for him-
self or herself, not being in possession of identification materials, showing signs of being fearful or submissive, having injuries or other signs of physical abuse, claim-
ing to be “just visiting” an area but unable to articu-
late where they are staying or remember addresses, and being in possession of hotels, motel items. Another possi-
ble sign is the victim spend-
ing a lot of time with an older person who didn’t pre-
viously have a relationship with the victim.

“Often the victim is tied to the trafficker because they have no ID, no transportation and no money,” said Ritcherson.

If UMOS is contacted about a situation of sus-
ppected human trafficking, the agency will do an ini-
tial exploratory assessment to determine if there is a possibility of trafficking. If there is, that investigation will be passed over to law enforcement. In the mean-
time, UMOS will provide supportive services for vic-
tims such as paying for food and lodging.

“The person is vulnera-
ble and needs support as the legal process is taking place,” said Ritcherson.

UMOS also connects victims to other social ser-
vices agencies to provide direct services, including the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Justice, and Department of Workforce Development. The DCF was recently awarded $6 million to pro-
vide temporary housing for victims.

UMOS also works with state legislators to promote bills aimed at protecting minors involved in traf-
ficking. One in Senate Bill 245, the Safe Harbor Bill, which would prevent minors forced into prostitution from being charged with a crime, because they were forced into it. Another is Assembly Bill 69, an expungement reform bill, which would allow for a minor previous-
ly convicted of prostitution although forced into prostitu-
tion to have their record expunged of that crime, so it doesn’t haunt them for the rest of their life.

UMOS provides education through its Latino Resource Center with the goal of pre-
venting trafficking from hap-
pening in the first place. Call 920-410-2960.

Stopping human trafficking

For the general public wanting to know how they can make a difference in the fight against human traffick-
ing, Ritcherson offered the following tips.

“First, just be aware that human trafficking does take place in our neighborhoods. It’s not just ‘over there’ but everywhere. Second, educate yourself on the signs of human trafficking. Third, make a call if you suspect some-
thing. Call either UMOS or law enforcement to report suspicious activity,” he said.

If you or someone you know needs immediate help, call 911. If you are a vic-
tim of human trafficking or know of someone being trafficked, call the UMOS 24-hour hotline at 414-389-
6510, or you can contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline 24/7 at 1-888-373-
7808. You can also text 233733 or visit humantraf-
ficking hotline.org.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has a cyber tip line at report.cybertip.org. You can also call 1-800-THE-
LOST (1-800-843-5678). For more information about human trafficking, victim services, statutes and industry specific materials, visit BeFreeWisconsin.com.