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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.”

“My version [of a definition of human trafficking] is, one of the most heinous crimes that one human being can inflict on another,” said Roderick Ritcherson,

spokesperson for United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS), a seven-state nonprofit organization that helps underserved populations in three main areas: workforce development, child development and social services. The Wisconsin Regional Anti-Trafficking Project (WRAP) is part of UMOS’ social services division.

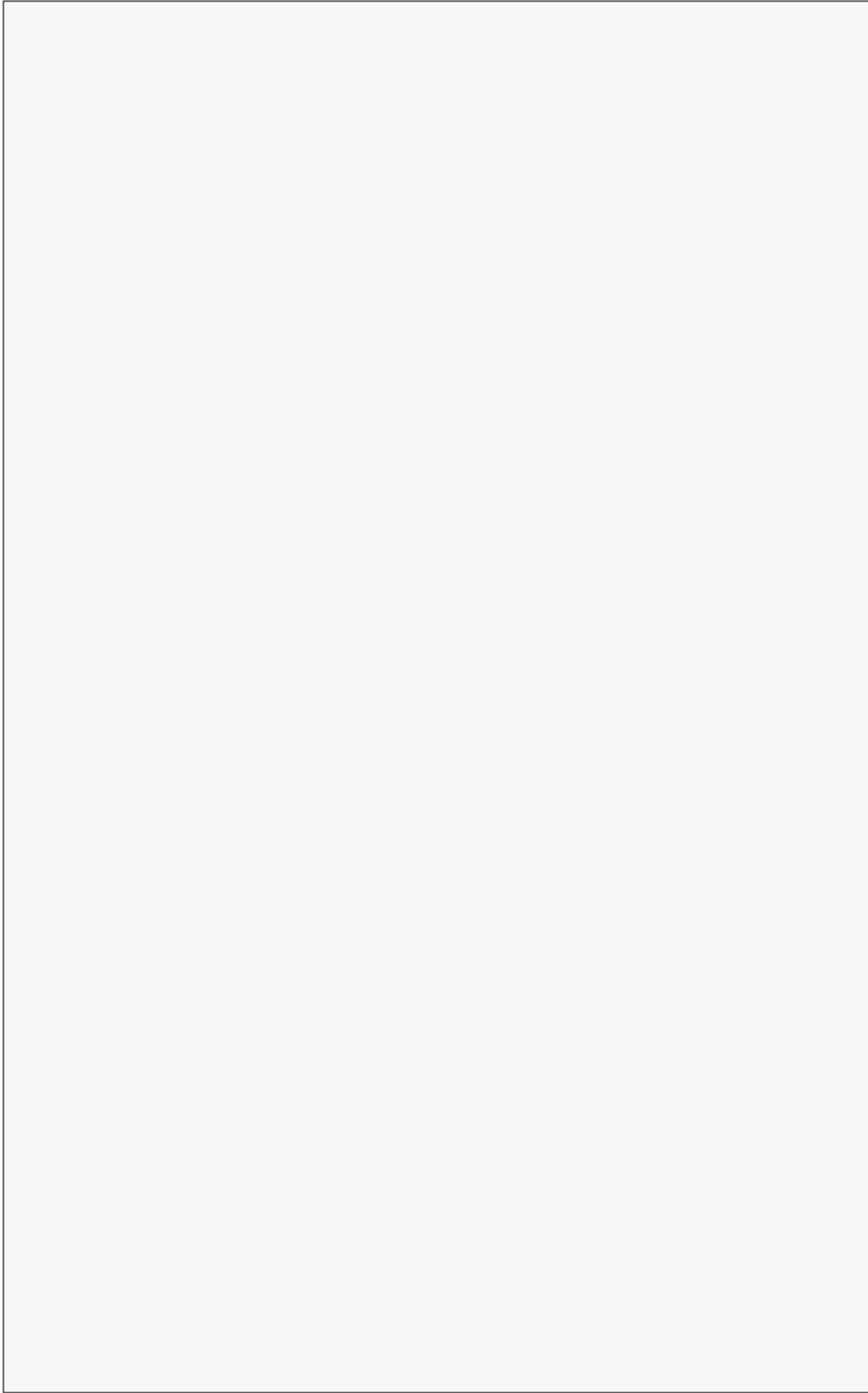
Between 2020 and 2021, UMOS WRAP staff trained 631 professionals, including law enforcement, social workers, medical providers and youth workers in 15 Wisconsin cities to recognize the signs of human trafficking. It has also screened 61 potential victims of labor and/or sex trafficking and identified 27 victims of human trafficking and provided them with resources.

Ritcherson said that he could not find any records of reported human trafficking victims in Clark County. However, in 2018 the city of Milwaukee did a study on human trafficking that, although it was focused on Milwaukee, identified 30 other cities around Wisconsin with trafficking cases. Ritcherson said human trafficking was widespread even though much of it goes unnoticed and unreported.

“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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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 restricting the worker's freedom of movement, withholding wages, withholding identification, using threats or intimidation, issuing fraudulent 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 himself or herself, not being in possession of identification materials, showing signs of being fearful or submissive, having injuries or other signs of physical abuse, claiming to be "just visiting" an area but unable to articulate where they are staying or remember addresses, and being in possession of hotel/motel items. Another possible sign is the victim spending a lot of time with an older person who didn't previously 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 suspected human trafficking, the agency will do an initial 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 meantime, UMOS will provide supportive services for victims such as paying for food and lodging.

"The person is vulnerable and needs support while the legal process is taking place," said Ritcherson.

UMOS also connects victims to other social services 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 provide temporary housing for victims.

UMOS also works with state legislators to promote bills aimed at protecting minors involved in trafficking. One is 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 previously convicted of prostitution although forced into prostitution 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 preventing trafficking from happening in the first place. Call 920-410-2969.

Stopping human trafficking

For the general public wanting to know how they can make a difference in the fight against human trafficking, 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 here. Second, educate yourself on the signs of human trafficking. Third, make a call if you suspect something. 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 victim 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 1-888-373-7888. You can also text 233733 or visit humantraffickinghotline.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.

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lence, 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 'reported.' 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," he said. "The goal now is to increase the number of pros-

ecutions."

He said that there is often a lag between uncovering suspicions of human trafficking, verifying those suspicions 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 majority of migrant workers are Hispanic or Latino, so it made sense for UMOS to direct focused efforts to preventing trafficking in that population.

"Labor traffickers tend to focus on migrant farm workers and H-2A [temporary agriculture] workers recruited 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 totally at the mercy of the recruit-

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