

Serving Victims of Human Trafficking

■ By Katie Parker

The U.S. Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2007) indicates that up to 27 million people are held in modern-day slavery globally and estimates that 800,000 are victims of trafficking each year. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement estimates that traffickers bring 14,500 to 17,500 people into the U.S. every twelve months. These victims may be women, children, and men and some of them end up right here in Michigan. In fact, on January 27, 2011 an American [citizen from Detroit was arrested](#) after fleeing the country in 2005 when he was indicted on 22 counts of trafficking in persons, forced labor, alien smuggling, money laundering, extortion collection and conspiracy, and other charges. Several other men involved in the case are already serving seven to fourteen year prison terms and, if convicted, this man could face up to 20 years in federal prison. This is a crime that may be occurring in other communities throughout the State and as a result it is important to know how to recognize victims, ensure their safety, and identify services for which they may be eligible.

What is Human Trafficking?

According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, human trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person (regardless of citizenship), by means of threat or use of force, fraud, or coercion, subjecting victims to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. If a victim of sex trafficking is under the age of 18, the elements of force, fraud, or coercion do

not have to be present to meet the definition. These acts are different from human smuggling.

Who are Victims?

U.S. Department of State (2007) records indicate that the majority (80%) of victims globally are women and, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), 50% of victims are children.

Specifically in the United States, victims may be found working as nannies and maids or at restaurants, hair and nail salons, farms, strip clubs, and factories ([Trafficking in Persons Report](#), 2010). The report states that more U.S. citizens, both adults and children, are in sex trafficking than labor trafficking. Homeless and runaway youth are at particular risk. On the other hand, victims from foreign countries are more likely to be found in situations involving labor trafficking. According to the report, 82% of adult victims and 56% of child victims from foreign countries were victims of labor trafficking. In addition, young boys from foreign countries were identified as victims of sex trafficking. Traffickers most frequently brought victims into the U.S. from Thailand, Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, India, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic.

Traffickers may have promised victims a better future in the U.S., but victims may now be working long hours with little freedom. Victims of human trafficking may have had their passports or other forms of identification taken from them upon

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arrival in the U.S. They may be unable to move or leave their job and may suffer physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their captors. Victims may be isolated from others in the community and may fear retaliation against themselves or their families if they try to escape. Oftentimes victims speak little or no English and fear reaching out to law enforcement, fearing corruption in the criminal justice system or punishment. Traffickers may try to speak on behalf of victims or victims may provide a rehearsed story to law enforcement at the instruction of the perpetrators. Victims may also fear speaking with law enforcement because they blame themselves for being victimized or because of cultural and ethnic differences between the victim and law enforcement.

How to Help Trafficking Victims

Victims of human trafficking may experience physical and sexual violence during their captivity. They may have contracted sexually transmitted infections, had unintended pregnancies, or had medical conditions left untreated. They may express feelings of helplessness, shame and humiliation, shock, denial and disbelief, disorientation and confusion, and anxiety (phobias, PTSD, etc.). Victims may also be experiencing acute psychological distress, drug addiction, malnutrition, and a variety of other devastating consequences due to their victimization. As a result, it is important to know the rights of these victims as well as the services that are available to them in the U.S. to ensure their continued safety and to promote healing.

According to the Department of Health & Human Services, it is important to let victims of human trafficking know that they have certain rights given to them by the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#) and by the Crime Victims Right's Act. Captors may have told victims that

law enforcement and immigration officials will punish or deport them. As a result, victims may be fearful of those trying to help and may show empathy toward the traffickers. Like other types of crime victims, they may not initially self identify as a victim and women may be reluctant to speak with male investigators. It is suggested that staff specifically trained in interviewing children speak with younger victims. Interpreters should be used whenever possible to eliminate problems with communication. Others in the household or at the scene, who may be the perpetrator of the crime, should never be used as an interpreter for the victim.

Victims who are illegally in the United States may be eligible for several types of assistance to remain in the country. One type of assistance is called Continued Presence, which allows human trafficking victims to remain in the U.S. for one year (renewable if necessary) during the ongoing investigation of the case and prosecution of the trafficker. Individuals granted Continued Presence are eligible to apply for work authorization. Victims who are assisting in the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases and are likely to endure extreme hardship if removed from the U.S. are also eligible to apply for a T visa. Neither testimony against nor conviction of the trafficker is required to receive this visa. This allows for four-year non-immigrant status that may also enable victims to bring certain family members to the U.S. T visa holders are eligible to work in the U.S. and may eventually apply for citizenship. Some victims may also be eligible for services similar to those available to refugees such as food stamps, English language classes, and help seeking employment. The Return, Reintegration, and Family Reunification Program for Victims of Trafficking, funded by the Department of

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State, provides assistance to victims who wish to return to their home country as well as assistance reuniting victims with family members in the U.S.

To receive additional help when a case of human trafficking is suspected, call the Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Custom Enforcement hotline at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE (1-866-347-2423). In Michigan, there are three local Immigration and Custom Enforcement Offices located in Detroit (313-226-0500), Grand Rapids (616-235-3936), and Sault Ste. Marie (906-252-2200). Victims of human trafficking and those calling about

potential victims can also access resources by calling the Trafficking Information and Referral Hotline. This crisis hotline links victims and community members with local resources and referrals and can be reached by calling 1-888-3737-888. This hotline also offers referrals to local law enforcement agencies, but 911 should always be dialed in case of an emergency.

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