

LOCAL

'It's a problem here in Topeka': Experts say human trafficking not confined to big cities

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Few in Topeka and Shawnee County recognize a societal problem operating in the shadows. Unless, that is, you know what to look for.

Local experts hope to use Human Trafficking Awareness Month, observed across the country in January, to shed light on a problem most people don't realize exists in the Topeka area.

Human trafficking, the experts all agree, is not what the rest of us might assume or what popular culture portrays. In most cases it's not women being kidnapped off the street or children working in a sweatshop.

It's not a problem confined to big cities or developing countries.

"If you ask any local law enforcement officer or you were at the Topeka Rescue Mission or at the YWCA, they would tell you, that they are seeing on a daily basis victims of human trafficking," said Angie Boles, founder and executive director of Project 2 Restore, a local program to assist victims of commercial exploitation.

"It's a problem here in Topeka because it's a problem everywhere," Shawnee County District Attorney Mike Kagay said. "Human traffickers don't respect

state boundaries or county lines. If there is a consumer base, they will go wherever that is.”



A trashed mattress and other items were scattered under a budge at S.@. Buchanan Street | 2021 as people seeking to count the city's homes population look for places where they may be living This area was know as a possible site of sex trafficking before a flood the previous year. 2021 File Photo/The Capital-Journal.

Kaw Valley Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force coordinates efforts

In June 2021, a combined federal, state, and local law enforcement operation rescued 31 victims of human trafficking in the Kansas City and Wichita areas. Of those 31, 14 were missing children. At that time, Kagay's office ramped up local investigation of commercial exploitation, which included hiring a special investigator to focus specifically on human trafficking investigations.

In December 2021, Kagay rallied local law enforcement agencies to create the Kaw Valley Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force.

“Since that time, we have been continuously working to train area law enforcement and coordinate operational support,” Kagay said. “Last month, we sponsored and coordinated training on human trafficking for area law enforcement, which included presenters from local, state and federal law enforcement agencies.”

Kagay’s primary responsibility is to find and prosecute those who engage in human trafficking. His role brings him into partnership with organizations that serve victims of trafficking.

TRM Ministries (formerly Topeka Rescue Mission) is on the front lines of serving the victims.

La Manda Broyles, executive director of TRM, sees firsthand just how big of an issue human trafficking is in the area. She said most of the human trafficking TRM encounters involves some sort of sexual exchange.

“It’s a huge problem in Topeka and Shawnee County,” Broyles said. “We see some of the most vulnerable people are the ones who are preyed upon and enticed with not just money but protection or promises. The percentage of women we see who feel like they have to do sexual acts to keep some type of security or safety is extremely high.”

Broyles said, TRM comes in contact with victims either through its street outreach or through the intake and registration process at the shelter located in North Topeka.

“Oftentimes, the victim will end up on the streets with nothing if they try to leave,” Broyles said. “They might be beaten and literally left. That’s why it’s important for our outreach team to be out on the streets. Because oftentimes the victims end up with nowhere to go.”

Most sex trafficking begins with someone the victim trusted

Broyles said most sex trafficking is perpetrated by someone the victim trusted — a family member, boyfriend or someone providing food, shelter, protection, drugs, etc.

“When we really dig into human trafficking, we find that so much of it is a coercion and manipulation of the person’s brain, of their feelings about their body,” Broyles said. “The person begins to not only do what the trafficker says to do, but they begin to believe what the trafficker says about them.

“When the person leaves the life (of trafficking) they lose the security, but they don’t lose the thoughts about themselves.”

Broyles said TRM is working hard to better identify and accommodate sex trafficking victims. Staff receive extensive training on the causes and treatment of trauma. She said the rescue mission sees itself as the first responder, assisting victims who want to free themselves.

“Leaving that life involves three phases: intervention, stabilization, and restoration. TRM is the first two phases, which tend to last from 14 days to 60 days,” Broyles said. “During that time, it is messy. When someone is finally brave enough to leave that life, and they come into our shelter, we want it to be warm enough and welcoming enough and comfortable enough that they stay while they are trying to stabilize.”

Following the first two phases, restoration programs come into play — programs like Project 2 Restore, a long-term residential program for victims of sex trafficking, which operates at an undisclosed location in the Topeka area.

“Awareness is part of what we do,” Boles said about the importance of Human Trafficking Awareness Month. “We want to rally the community to know not just the part of the puzzle that Project 2 Restore plays but to get them thinking about the larger issue of human trafficking.”

Runaways and justice-involved women and youth are particularly susceptible to human trafficking. Boles points to homelessness, drugs, pornography and domestic abuse as factors driving the issue.

“Those are all intersections of trafficking,” Boles said. “Trafficking isn’t someone being kidnapped on the street and forced into the life. It’s the vulnerabilities that exist with our youth, within our families and our community. As a community, we need to ask how we can get better in those areas so that those vulnerabilities don’t exist or so we can help victims earlier.”

\$658K grant will go to investigate human trafficking crimes

One issue which complicates the fight against sex trafficking is determining who is a victim and who is a perpetrator. Victims may be used to recruit others into the life or forced to commit other crimes along the way. Kagay and his staff must sort through those questions as they prosecute human trafficking crimes.

“It’s a really nuanced, philosophical question,” Kagay said. “We talk in terms of ‘offender’ and ‘victim.’ The law certainly criminalizes all forms of sex selling prostitution. But when you’re looking at the behavior, you look at ‘Is this adult doing this of their own choice, albeit a bad choice? Are they not being forced or coerced?’

“While we prosecute cases criminally, you have the other side of that coin of someone who is being controlled by someone else. They’re not doing it because they want to do it. They do it because there is going to be some form of repercussion or physical harm if they don’t do it. That is a victim. They are not a willing participant.”

Kagay said his office works closely with treatment and advocacy groups to help victims get the help they need.

“Our primary function is to hold the offenders accountable. That’s how we’re designed,” Kagay said. “We have a vested interest in holding accountable the people perpetuating the problem.

“Then we work hard to assist the victim-services providers, and we have a great appreciation for the work they are doing. In our office, we do everything we can to treat the victims with dignity and respect and empathy, to walk them through this process.”

Recently, Kagay’s office was awarded a \$658,468 grant from the federal Office of Victims of Crime to hire staff needed to investigate human trafficking crimes. These critical positions include a task force coordinator, a human trafficking intelligence analyst and a dedicated investigator from the Shawnee County Sheriff’s Office.

“These positions will work together to amplify the work of the Kaw Valley Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force, ultimately resulting in increased intelligence-based operations,” Kagay said. “This funding will enhance our ability to significantly increase identification of human trafficking victims and hold the traffickers accountable through investigations and prosecution in our community.”

As law enforcement and recovery programs work together to combat human trafficking, those on the front lines insist it’s an issue all Topeka-area residents should want to address.

“It’s important for the general public to be aware of any type of negativity that affects our fellow community members,” Broyles said. “When you look at the person sitting next to you or in line by you, you don’t know their desperation. But we can all relate to some time in our lives when we felt a form of desperation. It’s important for all of us to not be too busy that we don’t care about what others are facing.”