



SHUTTERSTOCK/MANING

Harrowing Efforts *to Halt* Human Trafficking

BRINGING AN END TO THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRET OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

When people think about Southwest Florida, they typically think of a tropical paradise, with pristine beaches, multimillion-dollar mansions and breathtaking sunsets.

What they usually don't associate Florida with, is being one of the top modern-day slavery meccas in the nation – but according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC), the area is a hotbed for human trafficking.

Human trafficking, where victims are used for forced labor or sexual exploitation, often goes unrecognized and unreported. In addition, there's a common misconception

that human trafficking only involves smuggling illegal aliens. This, too, is not reality.

According to Alex Olivares, coordinator for the Florida Gulf Coast University Human Trafficking Resource Center and clinical supervisor for the Catholic Charities Department of Victims, 70 percent of the known survivors in Southwest Florida are domestic victims – born right here. “So, that misconception that human trafficking is only those jumping the borders or being brought on boats, certainly is exactly what it is, a misconception,” he says.

In addition, more than half of all trafficking victims are children, according to statistics from the Florida Department of Health, which also ranks Florida as the third highest trafficking destination, following California and Texas.



STORY BY CAMMI CLARK AND JAYNIE TICE

"The public in Southwest Florida is very unaware of human trafficking ... Everywhere we go, people are like, 'We have children being trafficked? Here? What do you mean?'" says Sally Senitz, CEO and co-founder of Wings of Shelter, a group of safe homes supporting and rehabilitating minor female survivors of human trafficking. Within a week of recently training school officials in a local middle school how to identify victims, Senitz says five children ages 12 and 13, were identified as human trafficking victims.

Identifying victims is another part of the human trafficking problem, says Christy Ivie of Christy's Cause,

one of the newest organizations created to help combat trafficking.

"Less than one percent of victims are ever identified, in the U.S.," says Ivie, adding that means based on that statistic, coupled with the number actually identified in Southwest Florida last year, we potentially have thousands more victims out there. "I think it probably haunts all of us because it's something that we can do, through laws and creating more awareness, to increase the number of victims being identified, and that helps our community know we have a problem."

"Unfortunately, traffickers are very smart. They know who to target and our community needs to be more

aware," says Ivie, explaining that the traffickers lure in vulnerable children. She also adds, that human trafficking wouldn't be such a lucrative business without the "buyers."

Nola Theiss, executive director and founder of Human Trafficking Awareness Partnerships, Inc. (HTAP), agrees, adding that human trafficking needs to be attacked from every angle in order to stop it. "All of us have different skills, techniques and approaches, and we all have something to give," she says referring to the fight against trafficking. "Sometimes big movements happen because a lot of people are working at it, and we need to value the work that each of us is doing."

Collaborating to Undercut Trafficking

èBella recently hosted a roundtable discussion for more than a dozen local representatives of key organizations together for the first time, with common goals in the fight against human trafficking.

While each agency works to end the atrocities of human trafficking in its own way, including

shelter and guidance for victims, educating school officials on warning signs, extracting victims and prosecuting traffickers, they all agree we have a lot of work ahead of us, and collaboration is a key. The organic, collaborative conversation brought some immediate ideas, like more judicial and public awareness, compilation

of statistics into a single database, brainstorming better ways to deter buyers and providing more support for survivors.

This article is the first in a series, as *èBella* continues to spread awareness and support the efforts of the charities and organizations involved in the fight against human trafficking.





èBELLA RECENTLY INVITED ABOUT A DOZEN REPRESENTATIVES FROM HUMAN TRAFFICKING-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS, TO A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION HELD AT THE UNITED WAY OF COLLIER COUNTY, NAPLES.

The road to end modern day slavery is long, but with the right amount of collaboration and consolidation – from law enforcement to nonprofit – we believe an end is possible.

Here’s a brief look at some of the dedicated individuals, the organizations they support and at least one way they help in the fight against human trafficking:

Abuse Counseling & Treatment, Inc. (ACT)

Colleen Henderson, community education coordinator at ACT, works closely with the SWFL Regional Human Trafficking Coalition (RHTC) and local law enforcement agencies to raise awareness and educate the community on identifying human trafficking victims.

“If you’re asking a 14-year-old girl what school she goes to and she doesn’t know the answer, that could be a clue,” Henderson says.

ACTAbuse.com

Christy’s Cause

Christy Ivie is founder of Christy’s Cause, a nonprofit working to eradicate sex trafficking in children in Southwest Florida through education and

awareness, restoration projects and justice initiatives.

“We’re finding that a lot of victims have been sexually abused as children, so there’s already a distortion of sexuality and expectations,” she says. “Traffickers are looking for isolated children ... that’s important for the community to know.”

ChristysCause.com

Collier County Sheriff’s Office

Marisol Schloendorn, a long-time investigator for the human trafficking unit at the Collier County Sheriff’s Office (CCSO), says the unit has had dedicated positions since 2004.

Schloendorn works to protect victims that may be mistaken for criminals. She says that officers are trained to look a little deeper when they think they’re talking to a prostitute. Part of her job also includes interviewing habitual run-aways, preventing them from becoming a victim too.

CollierSheriff.org/we-can-help/human-trafficking

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) and Catholic Charities

Alex Olivares, coordinator for the FGCU Human Trafficking Resource Center, says, “we gather data, do research, work on grants and collaboration, and we host the multidisciplinary team of Southwest Florida (for human trafficking agencies).”

Olivares also works as a clinical supervisor for Catholic Charities, providing mental health counseling to human trafficking survivors as well as supervising and staffing other cases.

“We (Catholic Charities) have a grant to provide case management for all survivors of trafficking in 10 counties,” he adds.

FGCU.edu/HTRC

CatholicCharitiesDOV.org

Human Trafficking Awareness Partnership, Inc. (HTAP)

Nola Theiss, executive director and founder of HTAP, works to end human trafficking by empowering individuals through education and collaborative action in Southwest Florida. HTAP offers both youth and adult educational courses.

“About half the work we do now is aimed at children, and we focus on prevention,” she says. “We’ve been approved by the Lee County School District to teach classes during school time.”

HumanTraffickingAwareness.org

Office of the State Attorney, 20th Judicial Circuit Florida

Amira Fox, the Chief Assistant State Attorney for the 20th Judicial Circuit in Florida, has watched the state of human trafficking awareness change vastly since she started with the Judicial Circuit.

“We still have a long way to go, most people still think human trafficking means bringing in humans on boats from other countries ... they don’t realize it’s the servitude and other things too,” Fox says. “We still have a way to go, but it’s (identifying trafficking) gotten a lot better in the criminal justice system.”

SAO.cjis20.org/ASA.htm

Our Mother’s Home of Southwest Florida, Inc.

Karen Watson is the executive director of Our Mother’s Home – an agency providing a safe and nurturing environment for teen moms (ages 12-21) in foster care and their babies.

“We are a shelter for teen moms that are in foster care and human trafficking victims,” she says. “We provide young women with the tools and skills to become independent.”

Our Mother’s Home works together with many of the other human trafficking agencies to assure the young moms get the proper support.

OurMothersHome.com

Project HELP

Shaina Anderson is a clinical director for Project HELP, a certified sexual assault crisis center in Collier County.

“We provide all of the forensic exams, collect evidence – working with the sheriff’s office,” she says. “We also provide crisis intervention, working with

the shelter and follow up therapy and counselling services with human trafficking victims.”

Project Help has a victim advocacy program, working with the state attorney’s office to help victims through the criminal justice process.

ProjectHELPNaples.org

SWFL Regional Human Trafficking Coalition (RHTC)

Lynn Brewer, treasurer of the SWFL RHTC, says the coalition’s mission is to develop a partnership with the community, service providers, law enforcement and the media to combat human trafficking through education, coordination, outreach and training.

“There’s some awesome, awesome organizations out there,” she says. “How do we put all of our efforts into some pots and get some of this done?”

SWFL-HumanTrafficking.org

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

Linda Oberhaus is the executive director for The Shelter, which was designed as a haven for women and children experiencing domestic violence. Oberhaus says that the shelter is home to adult victims of both domestic violence and human trafficking.

“I think that human trafficking has always existed,” she says. “It’s been one of those invisible crimes.”

The Shelter will soon break ground on the new Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence. Read more on page 78.

NaplesShelter.org

Women’s Foundation Southwest Florida

In addition to a “Stop Human

Trafficking” initiative at the Women’s Foundation, Brenda Tate, founder, and Charlotte Newell, programs coordinator, are working on a database for human trafficking cases to better understand the state of human trafficking in Southwest Florida, and provide the various agencies with sufficient resources to coordinate and cross-train with one another.

“The other reason that we invested in this project for the region, is that there are grants out there,” Tate adds. “Having this information for everybody around the table will help to quantify the problem and pull in the resources that will solve the problem.”

“Our work largely focuses on supporting the Southwest Florida Human Trafficking Task Force,” Newell says.

FundWomenFL.org

Wings of Shelter Int’l, Inc.

CEOs and founders of Wings of Shelter Int’l, Inc., Sally and Lowell Senitz, and executive director of development, Hillary Lemaster, work closely with victims and law enforcement.

“I am responsible for all of our community relationships and partnerships and coming to events like this to see how we can collaborate,” Lemaster says.

“We started internationally and we train all over the United States, but our safe house services to human trafficking victims are licensed by the Department of Children and Family,” Sally says. “We’re vetted by the FBI for witness protection for minor females who are going to be witnesses in federal cases.”

“The first three girls we housed were from Southwest Florida,” Lowell added.

WingsOfShelter.com 🌟