

Slavery in Savannah

How to recognize human trafficking and what to do about it

Savannah has all the ingredients needed to be a potential hotbed of modern-day slavery.

Nola Theiss is the executive director of Human Trafficking Awareness Partnerships, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to eradicating modern-day slavery. “That’s not a metaphor, not poetry,” she said. “It *is* reality, it *is* slavery.

“And human trafficking is slavery,” Theiss said. “It exists all over the world, including the United States.”

What is human trafficking? It’s forcing someone to do something against their will without reimbursement. There are three kinds of human trafficking – forced labor, sex trafficking and domestic servitude.

Theiss asked participants at a recent seminar hosted by the Zonta Club if they knew the danger signs of trafficking. “Do you have an interstate, tourism, agriculture, industry, hotels, a port, young people, girls, poor people, homeless people, drug addicts and kids who have temporarily gone nuts?” she asked.

“If you answered yes to any of those things, there is a good chance human trafficking is going on in your community,” Theiss said. “Have you ever been to a nail salon? A Chinese restaurant?”

Savannah has *all* of those things, and Theiss wants people here to know the signs of potential human trafficking. Report possible victims, so they can be rescued.

Theiss is former mayor of Sanibel, Fla., where she was involved in a successful fight against trafficking. “This is a hidden crime,” she said. “Statistics are not necessarily valid, but they are getting better.”

The 13th amendment of the U.S. Constitution bans slavery. “Mississippi was the last state to adopt it, in 1995,” Theiss said. “When you talk about slavery, it’s something that has existed since the beginning of time.

“The difference between slavery 200 years ago and today is that 200 years ago, it was legal, now it’s illegal. Of course, it should be illegal, but when something’s illegal, it’s hidden.

“We saw all the terrible things about slavery 200 years ago,” Theiss said. “It’s still happening in homes, farms, restaurants, but it’s hidden so people don’t recognize it.”

Seminar participants agreed it can be difficult to spot trafficking. “I’ve probably seen these victims and didn’t know it,” said Helen Bradley, director of the Chatham County Victim-Witness Assistance Program.

As editor of La Voz Latina, John Newton deals with a population that has many people who are new to this country. “Chances are I’ve probably come into contact with victims, but was not aware of it,” he said.

“I’m not aware of anyone who has been trafficked,” said Sister Pauline O’Brien, director of the Social Apostolate. “But I’m sure we have them in the soup kitchen line.”

Jo Anne Garcia-Melendez, vice-president of the Zonta Club, organized the seminar. Forced labor is sometimes seen in agriculture, she said.

“I’ve had my share of such clients,” Garcia-Melendez said. “It’s impossible to get them to open up to interpreters. If law enforcement wants us to help them, we have to develop a detailed process so we can keep all identities secret.”

One whistle blower in Atlanta received death threats, Garcia-Melendez said. If a trafficked worker is injured, and someone at the hospital calls police, his employer might refuse to take other injured workers in for treatment, she said.

“Orthopedic surgeons see a lot of these on-the-job injuries,” Garcia-Melendez said. “The surgeons we talked to are very concerned. If we whistle-blow on the companies that send us their workers, they won’t get care.”

“Victims rarely go to authorities themselves,” Theiss said. “They often don’t tell the whole story when they’re first rescued or have access to help.

“They’re lured with false promises of good jobs and better lives, then forced to work under brutal and inhumane conditions with no recourse available for them,” she said. “They’re told if they tell someone, they’ll be killed, deported, imprisoned, mistreated, or it will happen to their child or their mother or somebody else they know.

“The trafficker knows where those people are, so the victims don’t tell the truth. It takes a lot of trained intervention by social workers or law enforcement to get the truth out of these people.

“If they go to the emergency room, they’re afraid to tell what happened to them,” Theiss said. “If they go to a clinic to have a baby, now they’re afraid for the baby.”

Traffickers obtain victims through coercion, deception, fraud and even kidnapping, then keep them captive through threats, violence or economic means.

Children can be victims, too. It’s estimated that half of all runaways or missing children may be trafficked.

Parents can be traffickers, too. Kris Rice, director of the Children’s Advocacy Center, said she has worked with children who were prostituted by parents with drug problems.

In 2004, the U.S. Justice Department estimated that 200,000 children in America are at risk for trafficking in the sex industry. “At least 2,100 children are reported missing every day,” Theiss said. “Most turn up. Some are lost forever, or come back but are gone again until they’re really in trouble.

“About 71 percent are runaways or throwaways who are going to be exposed to drugs, sex, physical abuse and exploitation,” she said. “It’s going to happen because they’re young and unaware what’s going on. They don’t know where to seek help, because they see themselves as worthless.”

One common characteristic among trafficking victims is that they’ve been molested as children, Theiss said. “Traffickers are one of the groups that can read the signs,” she said.

“Some children may be sold through unscrupulous adoption schemes,” Theiss said.

“The price of a child in Asia is \$114, in South America \$250, in Eastern Europe \$3,500 and in the U.S. \$5,000.”

It can be difficult to get law enforcement officers to pay attention when someone ages 18-24 goes missing. Theiss’ own daughter ran away from home three times.

“They’re not children, they’re not tied down,” she said. “They’re just gone. Some are domestic victims of human trafficking.”

Victims stay in bad situations for all kinds of reasons. Pimps sometimes lure young girls into becoming prostitutes.

“Coercion doesn’t have to be physical,” Theiss said. “Sometimes, it’s psychological. People are tricked into coming into the country, they’re tricked when someone tells them they love them, or they need to get away from the awful parents they have.

“He gets them to another place away from their support system,” she said. “He says to the girl, ‘It’s costing more to stay here in this hotel. You could go work next door as a waitress.’

“She loves the guy, so she does it,” Theiss said. “Then he says, ‘You’re so beautiful, you could make more money. Before you know it, the girl is in prostitution and can’t get out.

“She’s told she’s committed a crime and will be arrested, that her parents will never take her back. She’s ashamed of what she’s done and still loves the guy, so she stays.”

Sometimes victims stay because of what Theiss calls “the certainty of misery and the misery of uncertainty.” In other words, the unknown is more frightening than anything else.

“If you’re in a terrible situation, at least you know what’s going to happen to you,” she said. “If you leave, you don’t know what might happen, and for some people, that’s worse.”

Victims are often undocumented immigrants. Theiss cited the case of a 12-year-old girl who showed up at a neighboring house, pregnant and bleeding, unable to speak English and tell anyone what was wrong next door.

“She’d been living in the house for nine months,” Theiss said. “Her job was to fix breakfast and lunches for a whole landscaping crew, take care of the children and keep the house clean.

“At night, she was a sex slave and had already been pregnant twice,” Theiss said. “She lost the first baby at 11.”

The girl was taken to a hospital. “A man shows up and says, ‘I’m her boyfriend. I’ll pay,’” Theiss said. “The police came and looked at the girl and the guy and didn’t do anything.”

The Department of Family and Children Services investigated, and moved the girl three times. Finally, a principal at a high school for young mothers intervened, and the four traffickers who were involved were arrested.

“All four were convicted and are in prison,” Theiss said. “They will be deported when and if they get out.”

In another case, a woman in Wisconsin was rescued after spending 20 years in a doctor’s mansion as a virtual prisoner. She told officers the doctor had lured her there with the promise

he would build her a house in the Dominican Republic. A concerned neighbor called law enforcement.

But many victims are American. It is estimated that as many as 200,000 Americans are trafficked domestically.

“This is *not* an illegal immigrant issue,” Theiss said. “It can happen to anyone who enters the country legally, illegally or who are citizens of the country. This is a human rights issue.”

An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year. “Millions more are trafficked within their own countries,” Theiss said. “They are 80 percent female, 50 percent children. It’s a business that generates about \$9.6 billion a year internationally, making it the second most profitable international crime.”

The most profitable is the drug trade. “Human beings are seen as a better product than drugs because they can reuse them,” Theiss said. “That’s how traffickers think. They’re not stupid, they’re just evil.”

Signs that a person is a victim include: they don’t have identification, they’re controlled physically or psychologically, they can’t move or leave their job, they labor in poor working conditions, they are overly dependent on their boss, spouse or others.

“The red flag is the victim doesn’t speak for him or herself,” Theiss said. “If you go out and offer workers a drink and they won’t take a bottle of water without permission from the boss, something is wrong.

“You might try to talk to a worker in a nail salon, and someone will come up to speak for them,” she said. “Traffickers take their passports, their earnings, convince them nobody cares about them and will punish them without their protection.”

There is a federal law designed to help victims, and some states have laws, including Georgia. Some communities also have task forces designed to work on the issue, and Theiss urged seminar participants to begin one in Savannah.

“What happens to traffickers?” she asked. “Under federal law, they can get up to a life sentence for sex trafficking, kidnapping, sexual abuse or death; up to 20 years for forced labor, trafficking into servitude, involuntary servitude or peonage; up to 5 years for conspiracy against rights.

“It’s a very tough law, but hard to prove because you have to have a victim willing to testify,” Theiss said. “You have to have a prosecutor who thinks the case is worth prosecuting, and you have to have a judge who understands the trafficking law.”

Rescued victims can get a temporary visa. Children are issued letters of eligibility that entitle them to benefits that are available to refugee children, such as food stamps, medical and legal benefits and work permits.

“Some choose to remain, some choose to return home,” Theiss said. “They need housing, food, medical care, language interpretation and legal services. Some need mental health counseling, income assistance or legal status.”

In a case in Houston, officers rescued 80 victims at one time. “The good news is they had prepared,” Theiss said. “They had been working with churches and any possible organization that might have places to put these people. They made sure the people who were going to take care of them had training.”

As more people learn about human trafficking, more victims can be helped. “In many ways, human trafficking is seen a lot like domestic violence was 30 years ago,” Theiss said. “People don’t know what it is, because it’s hidden behind closed doors. They’re just beginning to understand what the issues are.”

Much needs to be done. “There are only two shelters for trafficking victims in the entire country, one in California and one in New York for children,” Theiss said. “We are way, way, way behind.”

Theiss became involved in the human trafficking issue through the Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva, which spearheaded a community effort to form a human trafficking task force with the cooperation of the Lee County Sheriff’s Office. It has since been called a model of citizen activism, and Theiss has won numerous awards for her human trafficking work.

Almost anyone can help, regardless of age, Theiss said. “Know the signs of human trafficking, know who to call, encourage people and government officials to work on the issue,” she said. “Tell as many people about the crime as possible and make a financial contribution to a group that is combating human trafficking.”

Some questions to ask potential victims include: What type of work do you do? Are you being paid? Can you come and go as you please? Have you or your family been threatened? Where do you work, eat and sleep?

“Call 911 if the victim is at risk of imminent harm or is a juvenile,” Theiss said. “Call law enforcement (non-emergency lines) to investigate your suspicions.

“We need to tell people that if you see something suspicious, you’re not going to look like a fool and you’re not going to get people in trouble if they’re innocent,” she said. “They’re not looking to deport people, they’re just looking for victims.”

Human trafficking harms everyone, Theiss said. “Human trafficking is often connected to other crimes,” she said. “Eradicate it, and it will lower the overall crime rate.

“It’s a homeland security issue, a human rights issue,” Theiss said. “It’s morally wrong to accept the existence of slavery in the United States.”

For more information, visit www.humantraffickingawareness.com. To report suspected trafficking call your local law enforcement agency or the Department of Health & Human Services Trafficking Hotline, 1-888-373-7888.