

Highland Shores Children's Aid talks human trafficking

Sept. 22, 2020

By Kristena Schutt-Moore

During the Highland Shores Children's Aid Society's annual general meeting on Thursday, Sept. 3, they had a keynote topic and speaker. Lisa Mascherin talked with the board of directors about human trafficking and how youth are targeted.

Mascherin is a certified trainer in conducting forensic child sexual abuse interviews with the OPP and has been with Highland Shores for 14 years. During her talk with the board she focused on the sexual exploitation of women and children. However, that is not the only form of human trafficking where youth are targeted. There is also labour trafficking, forced marriages, bonded labour used to work off a debt, and child soldiers in areas of conflict.

In her speech she talked about what signs of human trafficking and sexual exploitation look like and how it is happening locally and on a provincial level. A single victim can make a trafficker over \$200,000 a year, and none of that goes to the victim.

Victims of human trafficking often start out with some form of relationship with their trafficker. Although the victims do not know it, it is during this time that the trafficker trains and grooms them into what the traffickers need or want. Oftentimes the trafficker does this while playing the role of boyfriend or something similar to gain the victim's trust.

Mascherin explains, "Some signs you might observe if someone is being trafficked or groomed could be new fancy clothes or electronics that are the best of the best. These items really lure children and youth because oftentimes their parents can't get them for them."

Other signs are when a person can't leave or come and go as they wish. They have no ID, finances or possessions of their own. During the "boyfriend stage" the trafficker has often taken a lot of photos of their victim, including nudes or other compromising situations. These will later be used as blackmail to get the victim to do things the trafficker wants.

"We all know how important social media is these days. So for youth, getting threatened with having nude pictures of themselves being posted to social media is a really scary thing for them," says Mascherin.

Later on, as time passes, the victim may look malnourished and unhealthy. This is often due to the introduction of drugs. Traffickers will want their victims to stay high or drug induced. The need for the next drug fix can be used to keep the victim in the situation they are in. At this point Mascherin says that to the victim, food and self care become second concern to getting their drugs.

Their training or grooming could also lead to a fear of the police, or have them start cutting off contact to those they have had close relationships with in the past. Effectively cutting themselves off from those who care for them, or could help them.

They might also show signs of obvious abuse such as bruising, cigarette burns and fractures. Mascherin says that traffickers tend to brand their victims so that others in the trafficking world know who the victim "belongs to." So tattoos or scarring that looks like what could be a trafficker's street name can sometimes be found on a victim's body.

After a while the youth goes missing as the trafficker takes them to a new location, or sometimes, disposes of them. Sometimes, once older and conditioned or trained enough, victims are put to work as "recruiters." Playing a "best friend" role they start bringing in new victims to their trafficker.

Mascherin explains that, "Victims are, oftentimes, those with low self esteem, poor family relations, or in situations of poverty." Trafficking can occur anywhere. Mascherin says that short-term rentals are becoming more popular to house victims and

their clients. This is because the tenants are constantly rotating through and neighbours don't pay as much attention to who is renting the space as they get used to the constant flow of different people. Even so, the most popular spot for traffickers is hotel and motel rooms.

Some things to look for in these situations are to watch for when one person books the rental, but many people show up. The individual goes to great lengths to hide their vehicle or licence plate from view of any cameras. Or if cleaning services are provided, watch for any refusal for cleaning people to enter the building or room.

If let into the room, a person may see an extensive amount of communication equipment such as cellphones or laptops which are used to book the victim's services. A lack of clothes or personal items will be noticeable and if the victim is under sexual exploitation, such items may be found in the room as well.

?One of the things that I have always been told to keep in mind is that hotel rooms and motel rooms with sliding doors that go directly out to the parking lot are a really big target for human traffickers for their clientele, as they don't have to be spotted by staff.? Mascherin pointed out.

Many websites used to sell items from maple syrup, to crafts, to construction to cleaning services, can also be used by traffickers to sell their victims' services. To show this, Mascherin pulled up a computer screenshot of different towns, and they included areas from Peterborough to Tweed. While Bancroft and the surrounding area was not listed, Mascherin says that does not mean nothing is happening.

Ontario released some funding for community based programming to help stop human trafficking a few years ago. This allowed for the creation of a strategy for OPP, front line workers, and organizations like the Highlands Shores Children's Aid Society to combat human trafficking. Those interested in more information on this strategy are invited to visit <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-anti-human-trafficking-strategy-2020-2025>.

?Human trafficking can often seem like it is in a silo by itself. But if we take a step back we can see that it can take a community effort approach to helping victims,? says Mascherin. ?This isn't just a CAS issue, or victim services issue or police issue for that matter. It's all of our concern. Traffickers are recruiting girls as young as 12 and 13.?

These victims often come from homes where the parents have been marginalized or racialized in their communities. Mascherin says that she often works with parents who are having struggles parenting their teen. These victims often start out with other forms of abuse before meeting their trafficker. Youth that enter group homes are often targeted as they are easy targets. Mascherin says that at times traffickers are spotted sitting and waiting in their car just miles down the road from a girl's group home. They sit and wait for a youth to run away, and in some cases have already started a connection with their intended victim. Mascherin says that this has happened within Prince Edward County.

?If we can start reaching out to victims, parents and youth, we will start seeing a change,? says Mascherin as she believes education and open honest conversations about human trafficking are important to have in the community.