



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY  
COUNTY OF TULARE

Tim Ward, *District Attorney*

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Human trafficking is the use of force, fraud or coercion to exploit someone for labor or commercial sex. As awareness on this topic grows, Family Services Tulare County and the Office of the Tulare County District Attorney are in hopes that by now, you are familiar with the term.

There are two types of human traffickers. Sex traffickers often prey upon our most vulnerable youth — runaways, children in foster care, and others with little to no support system. Labor traffickers frequently lure foreigners to the United States with the promise of a better life, only to force them into modern-day slavery, where they will work for a debt they can never repay.

Traffickers evade detection by targeting victims who come from backgrounds or communities that may make them reluctant to seek help from authorities or our human services system. Throughout their traumatic experiences, victims of trafficking may justifiably develop fear, suspicion, denial, conflicting loyalties and coping mechanisms such as the use of drugs or alcohol. Foreign victims are often afraid of being deported or sent to jail. Sex trafficking victims may be told that if they report their traffickers to the police, law enforcement will arrest them for prostitution while their trafficker will go without punishment. Many victims of both sex and labor exploitation fear that if they escape, or cooperate with police or prosecutors, their captors may exact revenge and harm them or their family members.

Both types of human trafficking involve exploitation. In fact, sex trafficking often involves another term everyone should know — Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. It's been reported that each year, approximately 100,000 children are involved in the sex trade in the United States.

But that doesn't happen in Tulare County, right?

Sadly, we are not immune. At a training session last week, several agencies working with children and teens shared that they are now recognizing signs of human trafficking in the youth they serve. Tulare County's Child Welfare Services department works with children in foster care that are particularly vulnerable to this victimization, due to the history of trauma that many of these youth have experienced. And the District Attorney's Office recently prosecuted a case against Charles Benavidez, who met a 17-year-old girl through an online social networking website, and later forced her to engage in sex work.

Now that we are recognizing it, what is being done about human trafficking locally? The movement to raise awareness has grown exponentially through the work of many committed groups and entities, including:

- The District Attorney's Office has made human trafficking training for its staff a priority. Several staff have attended local and statewide training, and in October, all prosecutors and investigators will attend certified training. District Attorney Tim Ward has attended national training, and continues to seek out experts in this area. In addition, the District Attorney's Office will soon be initiating a county-wide task force, and will also offer an educational presentation to local businesses that are likely to come across victims.
- Family Services is a partner in Central Valley Against Human Trafficking, a grant-funded coalition led by the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission. CVAHT provides training and technical assistance, outreach and awareness activities, and services to victims of human trafficking from Merced County to Kern County. In the 2013-14 fiscal year, Family Services provided more than 70 direct outreach presentations and events to nearly 11,000 people in Tulare County, representing underserved populations among which victims may be found.
- The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Tulare County will make CSEC the focus of their annual conference this November.
- Governor Brown has committed funding to CWS to raise awareness of CSEC and to help collaborative partners develop prevention and intervention activities to address this growing crisis.
- In June, several local agencies learned more about human trafficking at a training headed by Carissa Phelps, author of *Runaway Girl*, an autobiography about her experience being trafficked as a 12-year-old on the streets of Fresno. Sponsored by Learn4Life, this eye-opening training was facilitated by several survivors, each with their own unique story. Former high school teacher and survivor Rachel Thomas summed things up when she said "we have a responsibility to help victims."

How can you help? One of the simplest things anyone can do to support local efforts to stop human trafficking is to learn more about it. We invite the public to join us at 7 p.m. on Monday for a 210 Connect community forum hosted by the Visalia Times-Delta and First Presbyterian Church. Staff from our respective offices will be on a panel discussing human trafficking in Tulare County. Hear a brave survivor tell her story, and find out what you can do to help.

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