

Human trafficking plagues even Minnesota

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Body

International **human trafficking** in the Twin Cities and **Minnesota**? No way.

Well, yes way, according to a federally funded "victim tracking" report released this week by a St. Paul-based legal and crime prevention advocacy group.

In the past year, Civil Society has identified 24 immigrants brought to **Minnesota** for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labor, indentured servitude or "mail order" sham marriages, which often turn abusive or violent.

The group found the victims through outreach efforts and referrals from a host of health, legal and law enforcement entities. The immigrants are from Mexico, Canada, China, Laos, Cambodia and Korea as well as Somalia, Nigeria, Egypt, Sudan and Malawi.

Twenty-one of the victims are women, who have a total of 15 children. The others are three men coerced into forced labor and salary kickbacks as the price for being smuggled or brought to the United States. The ages of the victims range from 14 to 40.

The report may be a wake-up call for an area of the country not usually associated with such exploitation. It is also the impetus for a first-ever meeting scheduled today by **Minnesota Human Trafficking** Watch. A coalition of individuals and agencies across the state, the group is seeking to raise awareness about the problem.

"We need to understand that this is indeed happening here and that the victims — because of fear of deportation, mistrust of police and harm that could come to family members — do not come forward to report," said Linda Miller, Civil Society's executive director.

Civil Society, which provides legal services and serves as a victim liaison to law enforcement and social service organizations, recently received a \$65,000 U.S. Justice Department grant for education and outreach.

An estimated 20,000 foreign nationals are **trafficked** into the United States annually by individual smugglers or organized crime outfits. Most of those brought here through legal or illegal means are forced to work in the sex industry, sweatshops or other jobs and assessed almost insurmountable kickbacks.

Minnesota was cited in government studies as a **human trafficking** entry point because it is a border state. The Twin Cities also are among 13 U.S. metropolitan areas identified as a high-intensity **trafficking** area by the Innocence Lost National Initiative, a federal effort to beef up law enforcement investigations into child prostitution.

A key member of the **Minnesota** anti-**trafficking** coalition is the St. Paul Police Department and its Gerald Vick **Human Trafficking** Task Force, which is named after the slain veteran vice cop.

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Vick was in the middle of investigating a prostitution ring involving women brought here from Mexico and the Dominican Republic and had set up a meeting with Miller on May 6, the day he was fatally shot outside an East Side bar while working undercover.

"I don't think people here really think this goes on here," said police Sgt. John Bandemer, a task force supervisor. "They think New York or San Francisco or Miami, but not St. Paul, Minnesota."

Bandemer is overseeing the implementation of a \$450,000 federal grant police received almost two years ago in an effort to combat international human trafficking. The effort includes statewide law enforcement training, information sharing, multi-agency cooperation on criminal cases, and working with Civil Society and other social service groups in building trust with reluctant victims.

Investigators recently uncovered a reverse mail order bride service, in which women from China and other parts of Southeast Asia were paying a U.S.-based middleman to hook them up with American husbands-to-be in order to come here.

Miller hopes the public awareness also includes recognition that in many cases, the people trafficked are indeed victims.

She points out the lessons learned seven years ago when the FBI busted a Malaysian-based prostitution ring. The nonresident women, and those with children, were locked up, treated as criminals and later deported, often back into the arms of the ring's traffickers.

"We may not have the caseload yet as other places do, but even if we identify, let's say, 10 victims a year, it is 10 lives that to me are worthy of being saved and liberated," Bandemer said.

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Minnesota Human Trafficking Watch will conduct its first meeting from 2 to 4 p.m. today at the International Institute, 1696 Como Ave., in St. Paul. The event is free and open to the public. To learn more about the topic online, go to <http://civsociety.org>.

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