Hampton Roads is a hub of human trafficking, say experts trying to raise awareness

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For months, Dede Wallace went to see a 19-year-old girl who was jailed on a solicitation charge.

She was picked up in a prostitution sting at a Hampton Roads hotel. She didn't see herself as a victim, but in Wallace's eyes, she was.

"From my perspective, it was more of, 'What can we do to make sure she doesn't go into this situation again?' " said Wallace, victim assistance specialist with a new Hampton Roads Human Trafficking Task Force formed by the Department of Homeland Security a little more than a year ago.

Wallace and other members of the task force – formed with a $1.4 million federal grant from the Department of Justice – are hoping that, by approaching human trafficking cases differently than law enforcement has in the past, they can eradicate the problem altogether. Their goal is to help victims and investigate and prosecute human trafficking crimes, starting by raising awareness.

"Without saying it's a problem, you don't make it a priority," Wallace said.

A panel of experts – not including Wallace but including others on the task force – shed light on the issue Thursday at Norfolk State University.

They explained why trafficking is a form of modern day slavery, involving the use of force, fraud or coercion to exploit human beings for some type of labor or commercial sex purpose. It's often confused with solicitation, though, and many people think of sex trafficking first and don't realize the law also classifies people forced into other kinds of labor as trafficked.

Hampton Roads is a hot spot for trafficking because of its large military presence, tourism and easy access to major highways, which make transport of victims easier, Wallace said.

On the Eastern Shore, where there's a lot of agriculture, there is more labor trafficking, but in touristy Virginia Beach there's more sex trafficking, said Ebony Velasquez, the coordinator of the task force.

Adriana Mirarchi, a Homeland Security Investigations special agent, described a case in Portsmouth where a man was trafficking his wife and several other women. He would essentially make her go on dates against her will, listing her on a website. He would use their children to gain power over her and would physically abuse her. When he was caught, he was sentenced to at least 40 years behind bars, Mirarchi said.

Another case involved a man recruiting people from overseas under false pretenses to work in area hotels, promising them a place to live, an hourly wage and transportation to and from work. When they got here, he flipped the script and threatened to get them deported if they went to police, Mirarchi said.

Velasquez said cases like these are why the task force was created – to start combating the issue here.

It has brought together myriad agencies, including the Virginia Attorney General's Office, Homeland Security and local police and prosecutors. Wallace said that's key: Previously, those departments didn't work together. Now they do, and together they're able to go after traffickers.

The funds have gone toward more beds in women's shelters, hiring a Hampton Roads Anti-Human Trafficking Coordinator in the Office of the Attorney General, a victim services coordinator, case manager and three on-site counselors at Samaritan House. They've also helped with costs associated with investigating and prosecuting the cases incurred by law enforcement agencies.

Wallace said it's been a success, but tracking that has been difficult because previously no department kept numbers on human trafficking arrests, convictions or cases.

What they do know is that between October 2016 and December 2017, 98 new cases have been investigated and 43 arrests were made in Newport News, Hampton, Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Chesapeake, according to data from the Office of the Attorney General. Sixteen cases were solved and 64 victims were confirmed.

In 2016, Virginia had 152 reported cases of human trafficking, the 15th most in the country, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline Resource Center. For the first half of 2017, 83 cases were reported for the state, according to the resource center.

Velasquez encouraged the students in the room to take care of each other and speak up if something doesn't seem right. She warned them to be aware of what they are posting on social media and to not be a target for criminals looking for vulnerable people.

Tanya Street, who runs the local women's advocacy organization Identifiable Me, gave the attendees of the panel a challenge.

"Start bringing a voice to the things you see in darkness," she said. "Bring light to it. That's how we begin to change and grow."

"We need to stop this cycle."

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