

Human trafficking – not just a city problem

PAULINE KERR

WALKERTON – It might be the young girl sitting in the back seat of a car with an older man, while the front seat beside the driver remains empty. Or the dazed looking teenager at the fast food restaurant, eating like there’s no tomorrow and confused about what town she’s in. Or even the victim of domestic violence being helped at the local women’s shelter.

Human trafficking isn’t just a city problem, it’s here.

Human trafficking is defined as controlling a person’s movement for the purpose of exploitation. While some people are trafficked for their labour, it is the sex trade that is the focus of recent public education sessions.

As the presenters at the human trafficking community awareness session in Walkerton on Feb. 20 stated repeatedly, “Anywhere you have hotels, motels and highways, you have human trafficking.”

The awareness session was one of three in Bruce County. The first was in Lucknow on Jan. 23, and the third will be in Kincardine at the Davidson Centre, March 5, 6:30-9:30 p.m.

The events were made possible through an \$85,000 grant (over three years) from the office of the Solicitor General to Kincardine. OPP Inspector Krista Miller thanked the municipality for “being open-minded about the grant and reaching out to Brockton and Huron-Kinloss” so the wider community could benefit.

Presenters addressing the crowd of 70 at the Walkerton Clean Water Centre were OPP Const. Melissa Barfoot, Chelsea Donohoe from Violence Prevention Grey Bruce, OPP Detective Const. Melissa Laki, and Kim Wideman of Victim Services Bruce Grey Perth. Members of the crowd included people from many fields – education, social services and retail, as well as those there out of personal interest. The first part of the “lunch and learn” involved information about human trafficking, who the victims are and how they become victims, while the second part focused on what comes next.

All four speakers put to rest myths about human trafficking, the main one being victims are someone else’s kids. They aren’t. They’re our kids. Most victims are young



Pauline Kerr Photo

RAISING AWARENESS – The organizing committee for the series of three community awareness sessions on Human Trafficking consists of, from the left, OPP Const. Melissa Barfoot, OPP Inspector Krista Miller (detachment commander, South Bruce OPP), Kim Wideman (Victim Services), Chelsea Donohoe (Violence Prevention Grey Bruce), Heather Froom (Brockton Police Services Board), OPP Detective Const. Melissa Laki, Emily Dance (Huron-Kinloss Police Services Board), Jenna Liefso (Kincardine Police Services Board), OPP A/Staff Sergeant Keegan Wilcox, and OPP Sgt. Marla Barfoot. The first in the series of three sessions took place Jan. 23 at the Lucknow Sports Complex; session two was on Thursday, Feb. 20 at the Walkerton Clean Water Centre; session three will be on March 5 at the Davidson Centre in Kincardine.

women aged 20-25, but many are a lot younger. While some are indeed recruited from foreign countries, usually lured by a job offer, most are found through social media. Especially at risk are runaways and marginalized women.

The pimp searches social media for vulnerable kids – someone who’s being bullied, or doesn’t have the new cell phone and designer clothes. The pimp befriends his target, then shifts to the next phase – showering the victim with gifts, attention, romance. Many victims consider the pimp their boyfriend. Before long the pimp becomes the girl’s whole world. He isolates her, takes her identification and money, threatens her family, orders her to pay back the money he’s spent on her. Victims are starved, drugged, deprived of sleep,

raped and branded, moved from city to city, forced to work around the clock in an endless series of motel rooms and airbnbs.

Barfoot told the story of a traffic stop she’d made several years ago – the young girl in the car with two older men. The car had been seen in Windsor and Toronto – red flags. The girl turned out to be only 14, and had met the men on Facebook.

Until then Barfoot had thought human trafficking was a city problem. “I wondered how many victims I had lost because I wasn’t educated,” she said.

Donohoe told a different story – a woman in her mid-20s at a women’s shelter. The abusive boyfriend was actually her trafficker. Human trafficking is multi-faceted, she said, noting some of her co-workers hadn’t seen the warning signs.

Just as victims aren’t the same, neither are the people who victimize them. Pimps might be drug dealers, gang members, criminals, but Barfoot and Donohoe told about girls being trafficked by family members. And the victims themselves become involved in recruiting other girls. What they have in common is they’re master manipulators.

What to look for? According to Barfoot, the answer is “something that just doesn’t seem right.” It might be a suspicious vehicle, often a luxury care like a Cadillac or Range Rover; a girl that isn’t dressed for the weather; a substantial age gap between the girl and the men with her. Other indicators include the male talking for the female and having her identification.

Donohoe identified “red flags” for parents and guardians - unexplained clothing and electronics, chronically skipping school, changes in behavior. Social services and health workers should be alerted by a boyfriend who refuses to let the girl speak to them alone, and wounds at various stages in healing.

As for the customers, Donohoe pulled no punches. “Traffickers are preying on victims because you are paying for sex. ... This is a crime.”

Barfoot said the OPP has gone to hotels in the area to educate people on what to look for. “We need boots on the ground,” she said. While the police officer in the school program has proved controversial, Barfoot said it’s important for youth to have a relationship with police. Anyone who notices something suspicious should call police.

Laki outlined a number of changes to the legal system over the past several years aimed at protecting victims. Key pieces of legislation include Bill C-36, that treats prostitution as victimization. She described an investigative approach that is “victim centred. These are highly trauma-

tized individuals.” They’re often not ready to make a statement, something police need to proceed with prosecution. “But we need to remember that’s their choice,” she said. Continuing to build a rapport with the victim – offering her something to eat, asking her what she needs – may result in charges further down the road.

The #metoo movement has resulted in more victims coming forward. And when they do, today’s lawyers and judges have more resources than they used to. And contrary to popular opinion, there is no statute of limitations.

Laki spoke about Karly Church, a former victim of human trafficking who now works with police in Durham Region. She noted Church is now supporting 270 victims.

“It’s important to train as many people as possible and expand that circle of care,” said Laki.

Rural policing means adapting what’s already been learned in the city. That might mean a poster that says, “If you see something, say something.” It could include posting phone numbers at fast food restaurants, so victims know who to call.

Wideman described a wide range of help that’s available when victims do make that call – everything from the practical – a bag filled with basic necessities and maybe a change of clothes, to counselling, dental care, emergency accommodation and a cell phone (people with an old cell phone that can still hold a charge were urged to donate it to Victim Services).

Victim Services works with a wide variety of community partners to help those who have suffered trauma including human trafficking. Victims don’t need a referral by police – they can contact Victim Services on their own.

The 24-hour Victim Services contact number is 1-866-376-9852.

In emergencies, call 911. For non-emergencies, the OPP can be contacted toll-free anywhere in Ontario at 1-888-310-1122 (TTY – 1-888-310-1133).

There are additional upcoming education sessions for those who’d like more information about human trafficking. The first is session three in Kincardine, March 5. The other two are through Violence Prevention Grey Bruce, at the Unifor Family Education Centre in Port Elgin March 26, 6:30-9:30 p.m. (no registration), and March 27, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. (register at www.publichealthgreybruce.on.ca/About-Us/Event-Calendar). The sessions feature speakers Kaitlin Bick and Karly Church, both survivors of human trafficking who are now using their knowledge to help other victims.

Subscription Special

Subscriptions for only **\$35/year** Regular \$40/year (Offer expires February 28, 2020)

The Walkerton Herald-Times

10 Victoria St., N., Walkerton 519-881-1600

CASH