

Commentary

The ladies saw hell's slavery pit

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They looked like three Methodist church ladies sitting around the conference table, with their gray coifs and fastidious outfits.

But a few minutes into the conversation it became clear that the three had seen a pit of hell.

In fact, they were League of Women Voters volunteers — the civic equivalent of church ladies - and the hell they had seen was human trafficking in Houston.

Like most of us, they had previously thought of it as a problem mainly in exotic places like Bangkok. Instead they learned that it's a huge problem in the United States.

The most calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline came from Texas, and the most in Texas came from Houston.

"It was horrifying," said Anne Herbage. "It was particularly difficult to deal with meeting victims. We lead much more sheltered lives than we think."

They talked to one woman who had been tricked into prostitution, whose brutal pimp cut her to keep her in line.

"She showed us the scars on her legs and her face," said Laura Blackburn, who has spent most of the past year chairing a League study into the issue in Houston.

They interviewed another woman, the daughter of scientists, who had been seduced by a man she thought loved her. He turned out to be a ruthless pimp who lured her into his basement, chained her to a bed and rented her out to other men.

The emotional impact on Blackburn and two committee members - Herbage and Penny Milbouer, who did most the work on the study - was intense.

"It really affected my emotional life," said Blackburn. "I was unsure I would be able to complete this study, it was affecting me so much."

They knew the few victims they met were among thousands of others - not just sexual slaves, but probably an equal number or more of men and women trafficked into forced labor in restaurants, construction and other industries.

The women did get the study completed and issued a report this week.

They learned that Texas was one of the first states to outlaw human trafficking, making it a second-degree felony in 2003 and requiring that a national hotline number be posted in certain businesses.

They learned, however, that nearly all cases are referred to the feds for prosecution through a task force under the leadership of Assistant U.S. Attorney Edward Gallagher.

The task force includes four deputies from the Harris County Sheriff's Office, who work out of the federal office.

As of last November, the task force had rescued 169 victims of both sex and labor trafficking and charged 29 defendants in 13 indictments.

A separate task force focusing only on trafficked minor sex workers rescued 45 minors who were U.S. citizens and convicted all 22 perpetrators charged.

Victims exempt

Only three cases have been handled out of the District Attorney's Office in the past two years, the report found. And the County Attorney's Office focuses on using nuisance laws to shut down the cantinas where many immigrant girls and women are forced to sell themselves.

The law now exempts those victims from immediate deportation and allows them to sue their enslaver. But few do, the study indicated, often out of fear for the safety of relatives back home.

The number of traffickers caught is small compared with the problem. A State Department study estimated that only one in 200 trafficking victims is identified. But Blackburn and Milbouer said they have a tempered optimism.

Even some 'johns' upset

Attitudes among officials have changed. Blackburn said 10 years ago officials looked at sex slaves the way officials looked at domestic violence victims 30 years ago.

What's more, some "johns" have been so offended at seeing young girls offered up that they have reported it to the authorities.

And the Legislature continues to strengthen anti-trafficking laws.

But there is a long way to go before the general public becomes aware of the magnitude of the problem and fully understands, in Milbouer's words, the forces that consign "the economically desperate to a desperate life."

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