

Supes hear update on human trafficking unit established last year

By Hans Peter, Daily Democrat

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After forming the District Attorney's Human Trafficking Unit over a year ago, Yolo County officials have discovered something: the sex trade is alive and well in Yolo's cities.

The recently established branch of the DA's Office presented findings to the Yolo County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday. Based on their presentation, the county and surrounding areas have an uphill battle to curb human trafficking.

"It's essentially modern day slavery," said John Ehrk, a chief Investigator with the DA's Office. "Sacramento ranks within the top three cities in the nation for trafficking."

That fact marks only one of several appalling statistics surrounding the issue. According to the National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, the nation experiences 1.6 million juvenile runaways per year with roughly one third of those individuals will be "recruited" by a pimp within 48 hours. The average age of these runaways is 12 years old.

Moreover, the California Attorney General's Report on Human Trafficking conducted in 2012 claims the state is one of the top four destinations for the trafficking trade and about 72 percent of trafficked individuals were U.S.-born.

These wide-angle statistics point to the obvious problem of trafficking in the state, but a focused look at Yolo County reveals a similar trend.

"Many still believe it's not a problem in Yolo County," said Deputy District Attorney Jennifer Davis, who also presented to the supervisors.

Davis said she was surprised at the levels of sex trafficking in Yolo County since she was specifically trained and assigned to the issue last year. She is one of two professionals on the issue in the county.

According to her, the human trafficking unit has taken on eight cases in the county in the last year and another four could hit the courts soon. For only a year's span of investigation, those numbers point to a much broader trafficking problem in the area, one that cannot be tackled by police and law involvement alone.

Davis said the process of finding pimps starts with a general community education on the subject. Public education has been one of the primary focuses of the group, which presents trafficking issues to medical providers, public workers and others in the community.

"Every time we do a presentation, we get phone calls from people who realize they might know someone who's being exploited," Davis said. She explained that the public eye can actually be one of the most effective tools, as many exploited individuals — and their exploiters — avoid law enforcement at all costs.

“(Exploited individuals) are told (by pimps) that the criminal justice system and law enforcement will not help them,” Davis said.

Public education marks only one of several ways the human trafficking unit has pulled individuals out of the sex trade and incriminated those who exploit them. They’ve worked closely with local law enforcement to execute “sex stings,” which lure pimps into transactions that eventually lead to their exposure and arrest. Undercover operations have taken place in West Sacramento, Davis and Woodland since May of last year.

The very advertisements trafficking rings use to attract buyers can also be traced by law enforcement for such undercover operations. Davis and Ehrk said they have done their fair share of “social media scraping” to source criminals.

“These (pimps) are mobile,” said Ehrk. “They’ll come to you. Where there’s money, they will travel.”

Ehrk went on to say that the demand for illegal sex cannot be quelled by sting operations and arrests alone — as with any form of demand, those willing to buy sex with juveniles will find it elsewhere, even if the county completely eliminates transactions within its borders.

That said, a combined effort from several fronts is needed to actually make a dent in the trade.

He also said the sex trade is not as high profile as the drug trade and proves far more efficient.

“Once you sell a drug, it’s gone,” Ehrk said. “When you sell a person, you still have them. It’s a money making machine.”

With such lucrateness, many will attempt to fill gaps in the trade where others have been busted.

“It’s a constant process,” said District 3 Supervisor Matt Rexroad, who suggested the trade is a continuum, not a simple fix. “It’s a constant problem. My understanding is that it’s just everywhere.”

“Everywhere” includes the courtrooms themselves. Davis said the county has attempted to approach the cases as “victim-centered” — this approach aims to treat exploited individuals as victims of a crime performed by an exploiter or sex offender. The county has paired with Yolo County Child Services and Empower Yolo to build rapport with affected individuals who likely have little faith in the justice system.

“It’s a work in progress,” Ehrk said, summing up the year’s efforts. Though the unit is still taking its first steps, supervisors expressed thanks and encouragement for the next year.