



Local shelter top priority for victims of human trafficking

By John Newton

Posted Jan 30, 2018 at 12:04 PM

Last month's event at Savannah State University marked the third consecutive year the Savannah Council on Interagency Diversity (SIDC) has organized a day-long symposium to educate the public on the dangers posed by human trafficking.

Featuring a variety of speakers from law enforcement as well as counselors and caregivers, the 2018 Savannah Traffick Jam offered participants concrete advice on how to combat a problem that is ongoing and widespread.

Keynote speaker, Dr. Jacquelyn Meshelemiah, a professor in the Department of Social Work at Ohio State University, said her interest in human trafficking began early in her career when she was a social worker in Buffalo, New York.

"I met a young prostitute and was struck by how we were alike in many ways," Meshelemiah recalled. "We were both women of color and in our twenties. But then she told me about her life on the streets and how her pimp had taken complete control of her life, even to the point of forcing her to have sex with animals and I knew I had to do something to stop this exploitation."

Meshelemiah said trafficking occurs in several forms, primarily, sexual bondage and forced labor. "Sex trafficking gets lots of attention but the truth is that over half the trafficking cases worldwide deal with labor trafficking," she said.

Meshelemiah gave several reasons why human trafficking persists in the face of efforts to eradicate it.

"First we have to face the fact that Western civilization has a long history of exploitation," she said.

"Our gendered labor markets are still characterized by pay inequalities and disparities.

Discriminatory immigration laws in the U.S. make it very difficult for people from certain countries to travel here. Because of lax or uneven enforcement of penalties for noncompliance,

unethical business interests turn a blind eye to trafficking. And the abject poverty and wealth disparity prevalent in many third-world nations create a push-pull cycle that maintains a steady supply of fresh victims.”

Meshelemiah said many of the “home-grown” victims of sex-trafficking come from dysfunctional families. “Fully one-third of all young people who run away from home are picked up by traffickers within the 1st 48 hours they are on the streets. We’re talking about girls between the ages of 12 and 14 and boys as young as 11 years old.”

Is human trafficking on the rise here?

The Polaris Project is a non-governmental organization that works to combat and prevent human trafficking. U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, Bobby Christine, said Polaris reported 8000 cases of human trafficking in the U.S. in 2016.

“Does this mean it is more prevalent now,” Christine asked. “Perhaps, like child molestation, we’re just getting better at identifying it now. Human trafficking relies on networks– victims, abusers, criminal facilitators, and transportation. And you fight a network with a network of your own– concerned citizens, law enforcement, counselors, and aggressive prosecutors. We are a shield but we also carry a sword. You give us the ball and we will run with it.”

Invoking the religious theme expressed in an opening performance by the Alfred E. Beach High School chorus, Christine then stepped away from the podium and said: “Speaking not as U.S. Attorney, but as Bobby Citizen, I say to you ‘If we have God in our corner, how can we not end this scourge?’”

A 4-person panel featuring Kesha Gibson-Carter, Executive Director of the Rape Crisis Center; Doretha Rice, SAFE Shelter Program Manager; Julie Wade, Executive Director of Park Place Emergency Youth Shelter; and Lisa Wiggins, youth coordinator at Savannah’s Gateway Behavioral Health Services, addressed local concerns about human trafficking. Each of their organizations offers at least one service that may be of benefit to a trafficking victim but none of them are equipped to handle the specific needs of this victim class.

Doretha Rice said Safe Shelter, which provides temporary housing for mothers and small children, was not an ideal refuge for young trafficking victims. “At times, we shelter lots of small children and we get noise complaints,” Rice said.

Julie Wade said Park Place offers emergency shelter to runaway teens but is not a good fit for trafficking victims because of security concerns and worries that a pimp might recruit new victims there.

“Finding safe and secure shelter for victims of human trafficking is a statewide problem.” Wade said. “Currently, there are fewer than 50 beds for this purpose anywhere in Georgia and the closest to Savannah is 2 and ½ hours away.”

Kesha Gibson-Carter said part of the funding problem for such a shelter was political.

“We have reached out to local politicians repeatedly in forums and meetings,” Gibson-Carter said. “But there has never been much response or interest. No public official has shown a commitment to helping us solve this need.”

Katie Samuels, hotline coordinator for Georgia Cares, has worked with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. She described screening tools that are useful in identifying trafficking victims.

“We look at chronic runaways, those on the streets with no visible means of support,” Samuels said. “We look at unaccounted wealth and things like new clothes, cell phones and jewelry. Significantly older boyfriends can also be a red flag as can spending a large amount of time online with new or unknown friends. Pimps sometimes use special tattoos to brand their victims and identify them as property. Often times there is a family history of sexual exploitation that may involve prostitution by a parent or older sibling. And it’s especially frustrating when we have a victim who discloses to us then recants what she’s told us. Shame and fear can be very powerful weapons used by sex traffickers.”

Sgt. Brian Hawkins has extensive experience dealing with gang violence and human trafficking in his work with the Chicago Police Department. He urged attendees to avoid stereotyping criminals.

“On TV, they portray criminals as dumb thugs,” he said. “This may be true in some cases, but I can tell you there are some really sharp criminal minds out there and it’s a real struggle to contain their behavior as they adjust and adapt to our enforcement tactics.”

Hawkins used video and power point images to highlight some of his most notable cases. “The Chicago gangs are very adept at using young women to further their criminal enterprises,” Hawkins said. “And some of these girls are absolutely brainwashed from an early age. In some cases, their pimps groom them for years. We rescued a 10-year-old girl from one gang and I asked her what she dreamed about for her future. She looked at me and said, “I want to be the best “ho” in America.”

Hawkins said one of the thorniest issues for law enforcement was assigning blame to trafficking victims for criminal behavior. “This can be a real problem,” he said. “Sometimes it is very difficult for young women to lose their taste for the money and drugs associated with this lifestyle. But overall, today more judges and prosecutors will look at the big picture in these cases and seek treatment for them rather than punishment. My personal preference is to increase the consequences for the ‘johns’ who create the demand. I want to see more judges willing to impound cars, take their money, and splash their faces all over public media.”