

# The Star-Ledger

## Human trafficking a modern scourge

**Public asked to help by reporting victims**

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Some were from a rural town in Mexico, promised marriage in the United States but forced to work as prostitutes in Plainfield and Elizabeth.

Others were from Honduras, promised decent wages if they moved to America but made to work for free as hostesses at bars in Hudson County.

Still others were Russian, promised high-paying jobs but forced to dance for free in strip clubs.

All of these girls and young women were victims of human trafficking, and though their captors were eventually prosecuted, the restrictions they put on the victims made it difficult for them to get help, acting U.S. Attorney Ralph Marra said.

Marra spoke yesterday during a conference at Kean University on human trafficking during which he implored the public to help other victims who are "hiding in plain sight."

"Plain sight is somewhere -- hopefully -- (where) every citizen might have the opportunity to observe some of these girls," Marra said. "If someone looks young, if someone's not in school when they should be, if you find somebody like that, you should probably call" the state's human trafficking hotline, (877) 986-7534, he said.

"One human being brutally exploiting another human being is as old as human history. The 21st-century version of this is human trafficking," said Marra, whose office will soon prosecute a case

involving a ring that allegedly forced girls from western Africa to work for free in hair-braiding salons in Newark and East Orange.

Authorities believe human-trafficking exploits tens of thousands of people each year in the United States, and that New Jersey, with its ports and airports and large immigration populations, is a hotbed for it. Foreign victims are often lured with promises of employment or marriage but are then forced to work as prostitutes, house cleaners, or in bars and restaurants for little or no money.

"As long as there's a demand for cheap labor and commercial sex, people will continue to be exploited," said Kathy Friess of the Statewide Human Trafficking Task Force. "Whether it's prostitution or farm labor work or factories or domestic help, there's always going to be a supply of people who are vulnerable to false promises or claims of ... opportunities for a better life."

Not only are human-trafficking victims hard for law enforcement to find, but those who are located often do not cooperate with investigations, said Brian Hayes, an FBI agent in Atlantic City who specializes in domestic human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children.

"These cases are tough," he said. "They are tough because the victims in child prostitution cases by definition are committing a crime. And they have a distrust of law enforcement. Just as illegal immigrants distrust law-enforcement, prostitutes distrust law-enforcement because they don't want to get arrested."

Further complicating investigations is the frequent reluctance of victims to turn on their captors, Hayes said.

"Victims lie," he said. "Victims care about their traffickers and their pimps. If we don't understand that, talk to people that you know who work with domestic violence victims and ask, 'Is it possible to love somebody that beats you?' And the answer is yes, as irrational as they may seem. It happens every day."

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