

RECOVERY

The official newsletter of the RCORP Rural Center of Excellence on SUD Recovery at the Fletcher Group



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AFTERCARE FOR SURVIVORS

by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

Unlike a kidnapping or carjacking that bystanders can witness and report, sex trafficking is difficult to recognize. As a result, it often goes unnoticed and unreported. But the numbers are staggering: one study from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that at any given time over 300,000 Americans may be subject to the horrors of this modern-day form of slavery.

Survivors have a long journey ahead. Fortunately, public awareness is growing and, with it, our ability to appreciate the unique challenges they face on their path to recovery.

This issue of our monthly newsletter draws from the September 5 webinar presentation given by Sarah Medina, Director of Emergency Services with the *Refuge for Women Pittsburgh's Emergency Home*. We hope the information herein will help rural recovery home operators and staff provide the trauma-informed aftercare survivors need to break the cycle of exploitation and rebuild their lives as free and healthy members of society.

RECOGNIZING SEX TRAFFICKING

Defined as the exchange of a sexual act for anything of financial value—including drugs, housing, and gifts as well as money—sex trafficking is far more pervasive than people imagine. It can happen to anyone regardless of race, age, gender, orientation, income level or location, and can happen anywhere, from formal brothels, massage parlors, and strip clubs to escort services, prostitution on the streets, and rural truck stops.

Though largely unreported, the following numbers support the view that human trafficking and sex trafficking have reached epidemic proportions.

- An estimated 40.3 million people around the world are victimized by human trafficking each year
- With profits of over \$150 billion a year, human trafficking is now the world's second largest international crime industry, more profitable than gun trafficking and surpassed only by drug trafficking
- The average age of entry into the U.S. sex industry is 12 to 14 (Case workers in western Pennsylvania, according to trafficking expert Sarah Medina, say the rate there is actually lower, around 9 to 11.)
- 75 percent of sex workers were sexually and/or physically abused as children
- 92 percent of women involved in sex trafficking want out, but feel that they can't leave
- Sex trafficking has grown exponentially since the dominance of the internet and the online porn industry

Rural Challenges

According to Medina, many rural areas face even greater challenges than urban areas. Those vulnerabilities include:

- Higher rates of substance use and poverty that can lead people to do things they might not otherwise do
- Lack of healthcare, particularly behavioral health services
- Lack of transportation and spotty cell phone coverage that inhibit access to existing resources
- Inadequate training of law enforcement to identify traffickers and victims
- Feelings of isolation compounded by the inhibiting effects of gossip. "In small, tight-knit rural communities everyone knows everyone," says Medina. "Your doctor could be your next-door neighbor. Your teacher could live across the street.



WATCH THE VIDEO

of our September 5 webinar with Sarah Medina, Director of Emergency Services with the *Refuge for Women Pittsburgh's Emergency Home*.

[CLICK HERE](#)



The chances of you reporting a crime to the police officer who is your parent's or teacher's best friend is low for the simple reason that people talk."

Rural areas may also be more susceptible to what Medina calls "cross-generational chain reactions."

"We know of a mother who was trafficked by her uncle for drugs. When she became addicted, she sold her daughter to buy drugs. Trafficking had become so normalized in that family that we only found out when a new teacher moved into the area, recognized the signs that others had missed, and spoke up."

UNDERSTANDING THE VICTIM

Why don't they just walk away? Why don't they ask for help? Sarah Medina answers those common questions by citing a California study showing that the vast majority of victims (75 percent) have been trafficked so long (over two years) that it's become the only life they know. According to the same study, 50 percent of all victims have been trafficked as early as age 14. "That means the trafficker has become their authority figure, forming a family-like bond and creating intense feelings of loyalty."

Indeed, trafficked individuals seldom, if ever, think of themselves as victims. For Medina, it's even become a red flag when someone readily admits to it. "If that's the first thing they say, I know they've either been coached or have learned that saying so will benefit them. The feelings of shame, self-blame, and unworthiness are far too strong for victims to talk about openly. They've also been groomed by their trafficker to distrust all professionals, whether it's the police, government officials, therapists, or healthcare workers."

The victim's repertoire of survival techniques can include highly developed levels of obfuscation, manipulation, and dishonesty. "Over time, they learn how to get what they need," says Medina. "The problem is once those habits are formed they're hard to stop, even after leaving their trafficker and entering a recovery home."

Experts at Coercion

Traffickers are highly skilled at convincing victims that they chose the life they're leading. "Traffickers are adept at spotting and exploiting vulnerabilities," says Medina. "For example, if a minor has committed theft, they'll threaten to report it. If the victim is missing a father figure, they'll fill the void. In some cases, they'll play the romance angle. In others, they'll play the team angle as in, 'I can't make rent this month. Can you help me?'"

"Traffickers also play on a victim's fears regarding their own or a loved one's safety. A trafficker might say, 'You have a younger sister, right? I can pull her into this if you don't do what I say,' or 'Remember those pictures I took of you? I can always share those with your church, your friends, your family, or post them on social media.' The mental and physical safety of the victim and their loved ones is always under threat."



Traffickers typically start off as friend, father figure, or romantic partner before becoming more overtly manipulative. But along the way something even more pernicious happens. A "trauma bond" develops whereby the victim's identity merges with the trafficker's.

"Trauma bonds are very real," says Medina. "They're incredibly strong with intense feelings of devotion and loyalty. The hardest part of our job is watching a survivor go back to their trafficker. Sadly, it's something you have to be prepared for."

Long-term challenges for survivors include depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD, all of which can be further complicated by substance use. "The role of drugs is beyond powerful," says Medina. "Substance use easily becomes the victim's primary means of coping—of numbing physical and mental pain, dealing with the nightmares they're having, and escaping reality. And once the victim is fully addicted, traffickers who can provide a steady supply gain even greater power and control."

WHAT RECOVERY HOMES CAN DO

Step 1—Know Who You're Dealing With

Be on the lookout for new residents who combine an abnormally high number of physical health issues with a lack of essential documents, such as medical records. Risk factors include having low self-esteem, being homeless or a runaway, being a member of the LGBTQ community, and having been in and out of foster care.

Step 2—Know What to Ask

The following questions can help you identify survivors.

- Where were you eating, sleeping, and working before coming here?
- Do you feel stuck in your situation? Can you leave your present job or situation if you wanted to?
- Have you ever been deprived of food, water, or sleep?
- Have your identification documents ever been taken from you? Can we see them?
- Is anyone forcing you to do something that you don't want to do?

In some cases you can be more direct and ask "Have you ever exchanged sex for money, food, clothes, or drugs?" But avoid terms that are too direct such as "prostitution," "trafficking" or "sex trafficking."

Step 3—Be Trauma-Informed

Survivors have gone through so much that just talking about their abuse can be traumatizing. They may also be unable to remember events or be confused about their chronology, especially if they've been heavy drug users. And though it's essential that survivors replace toxic co-dependent relationships with safe, healthy ones, building a relationship with a survivor can be challenging because of their hyper-sensitivity to unpredictable triggers, some of which are powerful enough to drive them back to their trafficker. Below are some guidelines to follow, especially during your first encounter.

- Have snacks, food, and water on hand—survivors may not have eaten for several days
- Remove any signage, graphic art, scents, or other things that might be triggering
- Have help readily available in case someone has a hard time reading, doesn't speak English well, or has a physical disability
- Eliminate potential distractions so that you engage fully and listen actively

WANT MORE INFO?

To learn of additional resources listed in Sarah Medina's PowerPoint presentation, simply...

[CLICK HERE](#)



- Be wary of standing too close, leaning too forward, or looking down upon the person
- Use respectful, non-judgmental, empathetic language
- Do not criticize the trafficker—the survivor may still feel a strong bond with that person
- Don't probe—ask only those questions needed to obtain essential information
- Speak from a "Strengths Perspective" so the focus stays on the survivor's courage, resilience, ingenuity, and the power they have to achieve their goals
- Offer resources, but don't push survivors to get help—if they're with you and sharing information they've already come a long way
- Be prepared to deescalate tension if you encounter a traumatic reaction
- Be resilient—no matter what you do, many survivors may return to vulnerable situations and exploitation