

Activists shine light on sex trafficking

Neeti Upadhye, Staff writer 11:01 p.m. EDT August 18, 2014



(Photo: SHAWN DOWD/@sdowdphoto/, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

On a scorching Friday afternoon, Jennifer Wolfley walked up and down Monroe Avenue with a red Adidas drawstring backpack, handing out condoms and food to prostitutes who approached her.

The 50-year-old woman patrols street corners seven days a week, making her presence known in the community by exchanging pleasantries with everyone who passes.

"They call me 'Little Red Riding Hood,' " she said.

Wolfley, founder of the [Rochester Regional Coalition Against Human Trafficking \(http://www.rrcaht.org/\)](http://www.rrcaht.org/), works tirelessly to help abused and exploited people because she, too, was a victim of sex trafficking. After starting down the long road to recovery, she has crossed over to what survivors call "the other side."

"I'm invested because this has happened to me," said Wolfley. "This is not a job — it's a lifestyle."

Wolfley and members of several other local advocacy groups have ramped up community awareness campaigns about sex trafficking in the wake of recent legal changes and increased rates of victim identification. Anti-trafficking advocates are attempting to break down the stereotype that the crime is relegated to the underground markets of far-away countries. According to U.S. federal law, a sex trafficking victim is defined as anyone who is forced, tricked or coerced into commercial sex acts for services.

"A lot of people probably think this isn't going on in Monroe County — but it is," County Executive Maggie Brooks said at a news conference last month when she released two PSA commercials about child sex trafficking to the public.

Wolfley works primarily with adults, but the legal changes come as part of an expanded effort to treat minors charged with prostitution as victims by protecting them from facing criminal prosecution and connecting them to the appropriate social services.

"Before, when the law was that a minor could be arrested, there was kind of a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy," said Nicole Thomson, Safe Harbour coordinator at the Center for Youth. "Now we are able to have more genuine conversations because we can tell (victims) that we are seeing you as a minor and this is not your fault, you will not be prosecuted for this."

In the 2013-14 fiscal year, Monroe County was selected as one of six counties and two Indian nations across New York to receive \$112,000 of state pilot funds to identify and provide comprehensive services — such as safe housing and case management — to victims and potential victims of youth sex trafficking.

"It's a dubious honor," said Thomson. "It means we're one of the counties that was found to have the highest numbers of minors being criminally sexually exploited."

Since May 2013, the Safe Harbour program has identified 29 minors who have been involved in sex trafficking in Monroe County.

The county's initiative — which is in its second year — has become one of the most successful models in the state because of its partnership with the Center for Youth and its three-tier system of victim identification, which recognizes victims who are not ready to be officially identified by law enforcement.

Mike Barry, executive director of the Monroe County Youth Bureau, said exploited youths do not trust turning to the government for help, so working with an organization that's closer to the ground increases overall effectiveness.

"Everyone coming together is what breaks down the fear and allows us to identify these victims," he said.

All-too-common story

Wolfley was trafficked for four years before the police removed her from her exploitative situation. But it took therapy and nearly a decade until she understood the depth and breadth of her abuse.

"My whole family knew and no one did anything because they were benefiting from my circumstance," she said. "It took me years until I realized what had happened to me."

Wolfley's story is similar to those of other women and men who have been coerced into sex trafficking.

"Many times people don't realize they are victims of trafficking until they go to an awareness event," said Mary Jo Gugino Colligan, founder of Angels of Mercy, a local women's advocacy organization.

About 300,000 to 500,000 children in the United States are being actively prostituted, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And one out of every seven endangered runaway children reported to the center were likely sex trafficking victims.

Valerie Douglas, director of runaway/homeless youth services at the Center for Youth, said pimps often prey on disconnected children who do not have other support systems to turn to and control them through drug addictions.

"What makes them vulnerable is being pushed further and further out of systems, out of services, out of safety nets," she said.

Expanded efforts

New efforts to shine a light on this largely invisible epidemic are underway.

The Center for Youth has hosted 89 community awareness trainings and published two PSA commercials (<http://on.rocne.ws/1riYyJA>) since the Safe Harbour program's inception, and the Angels of Mercy have held several outreach events this summer, including a presentation to the Rochester Deaf Rotary Club last week.

International anti-human trafficking expert Matt Friedman also brought a documentary and presentation to the Little Theatre as part of a national road tour at the end of July. His "Breaking the Links" action-based campaign aimed to educate and galvanize young adults to take an active stand against modern-day slavery.

Friedman acknowledged that there is already a strong presence of organizations in New York dealing with the issues of human trafficking and said visiting Rochester was just as much about learning as it was about educating people.

"There's a really strong coalition of organizations that are working on this here," he said. "One of the messages that we are really trying to get across is the idea of unity. Here in Rochester, it is already happening."

Changes have occurred in police departments and courthouses as well.

Andra Ackerman, director of human trafficking prevention and policy with the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, serves on a task force that trains police officers and investigators to handle prostitution cases with sensitivity.

"We are doing very well in getting law enforcement to see things differently," she said. "I am seeing officers treat these victims as what they are — victims."

Investigator Brian Tucker of the Rochester Police Department said officers are now trying to take a holistic approach when dealing with victims and are making more of an effort to go after the pimps who are profiting from the situation.

"It has encouraged a lot of these young girls to talk to us when we interview them," he said.

The number of prostitution arrests have dropped off significantly in recent years.

In 2011, 138 women in the city were charged with prostitution. That number fell to 90 arrests in 2012, and to 66 in 2013.

Tucker said the decrease in prostitution arrests is partly a result of the Police Department being pulled in too many directions, but also because "a lot of it has moved off of the street corner and onto the Internet, becoming more shaded from the police."

Rochester City Court Judge Ellen Yacknin, who oversees the city's [new human trafficking court \(/story/news/local/2013/10/03/prostitution-court-views-crime-through-different-lens/2918193/\)](#), said she has seen around 10 defendants since the court opened last October.

The human trafficking court allows defendants charged with prostitution an opportunity to get their charge dismissed if they complete a recommended social service program, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation or mental health counseling, and do not get arrested again.

Wolfley said for her clients that is easier said than done.

"People have to be ready to quit," she said. "There are all these contingencies, but you can't tell someone when they are ready."

Yacknin conceded that, "the odds of the women succeeding the first time are extremely low" because of lack of trust in the court system but said her court "bends over backwards" to try to keep the defendants out of jail.

Different approaches

Critics say current efforts are not enough.

"I don't appreciate the politics around funding," said Wolfley. "The money in Safe Harbour is well-intended but misdirected."

She believes that more money should be put directly into street outreach and job creation for peer advocates instead of toward PSA announcements and training. Wolfley explained that victims who are on "the other side" but have a prostitution charge in their past struggle to find employment.

"If we have all these resources in place, why are people coming to me for a sandwich?" she asked.

Wolfley does plan to apply for a portion of Safe Harbour funding to help the developmentally disabled stay out of sex trafficking, a vulnerable population she said few are paying attention to.

Ed Suk, executive director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said sex trafficking needs to be fought with a multipronged approach. He acknowledged the importance of street outreach to give victims a safe way to separate from their traffickers, but also emphasized the need for higher-level public awareness campaigns to educate industries that may come across vulnerable people.

"I feel encouraged," said Wolfley. "We have to start somewhere."

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