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Awareness is up, but human trafficking continues to plague Orange County

New OC Human Trafficking Task Force report shows progress, challenges in stemming tide of involuntary sex work and forced labor



The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force released its 2023 report on trafficking in the . (Courtesy of the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force)

A decade of public awareness campaigning has yet to slow the flow of forced labor, also known as human trafficking, in Orange County.

That's one finding from a [new report from the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force](#), slated to be released Tuesday, Oct. 3.

Though the report says roughly half (49%) of local students can identify the warning signs that a person is being physically forced or otherwise coerced into sex work or other types of involuntary labor – a level of awareness that wasn't true a decade ago – other data suggests at least some of those teens also are vulnerable to being trafficked.

During the two-year window tracked in the report – 2021-2022 – the task force helped 420 trafficking victims, including 151 minors. Both numbers are higher than in any of the group's seven previous reports – and they almost certainly capture just a sliver of the broader problem.

“We’re doing our best to reach all those who are exploited and/or trafficked, but we don’t know how large (the problem) is,” said Michelle Heater, who directs victims assistance programs for Waymakers, a local nonprofit that is a co-founder of the task force.

Heater added that the victims helped by Waymakers or other members of the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force – a coalition of nonprofits, public agencies and several police departments – is “a snippet” of all people forced into sex work or other labor in Orange County. She said nobody knows, with certainty, if the problem is growing or slowing down.

“None of us would be surprised if this is happening in, literally, every city in the county,” Heater said.

“If you don’t think it’s happening in your backyard, it’s possible the people who are trafficking are just that good at hiding it in that particular area.”

Though there is little hard data on the actual size and location of trafficking in the United States, Heater and others who work with victims believe Orange County has historically hosted an outsized share of trafficking. Two reasons include the county’s wealth and its role as a tourist and convention mecca, both of which are factors that drive up demand for sex work. Another is that the county’s role as a landing spot for immigrants, legal or otherwise, and the fact that foreign nationals comprise an outsized share of the forced labor side of human trafficking.

Last month, a group of local philanthropists said they would work to end human trafficking. Susan Samuelli, co-owner of the Anaheim Ducks, said [she is leading a group of like-minded philanthropists](#) working under the name Ending Human Trafficking Collaborative. Though it’s unclear specifically what they’ll do, Samuelli suggested her group would continue to push for tougher laws and to raise public awareness about the problem.

Heater, among others, said such help would be welcome, particularly if it could focus on raising awareness about what trafficking is and what it isn’t.

Trafficking, for example, is a specific type of forced labor, involving a third party and some form of coercion. Not all sex workers are trafficked and not all people who are trafficked are involved in sex work. Also, Heater said, though immigration issues can play a role in all forms of trafficking, many people who are forced into sex work or other types of labor are local, not vulnerable new arrivals.

Heater added that if backing from Samuelli and others in the community could help the public understand such differences, groups such as Waymakers – which tries to help victims re-start their lives away from their traffickers – could focus even more closely on hands-on help.

“The members of the community who are speaking up on this are making a huge difference,” Heater said. “It’s really important.”

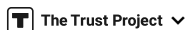
The task force report, the first presented since 2021, offered several details about the nature of human trafficking, locally, over the past two years:

- More than 6 in 10 (63%) of the people helped by the task force over the past two years were first-time victims.
- In terms of labor trafficking, a group that included 38 people, the vast majority (9 out of 10) of the victims weren’t born in the United States and roughly a third (36%) were minors.
- The report also offered data about perpetrators, noting that the vast majority (97%) had a criminal history and that 7 out of 10 times (71%) that history included crimes of violence.

If that holds in the future, human traffickers could face a new legal reckoning.

Last month, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 14, which stiffens the penalties for trafficking a minor for sex work and recategorizes the act as a “serious” crime. Among the new rules, a trafficking violation would count under the state’s “Three Strikes” law, raising the potential maximum penalty to life in prison.

Heater noted that Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, which includes police agencies from Anaheim, Irvine and Santa Ana, among others, will present stories about the help offered to trafficking victims and how their lives can be changed by getting away from the people who control them. Over the past decade, the task force – formed in 2004 – has helped nearly 1,500 people deemed to be victims of trafficking.



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