


Tran and Heater: Safeguarding Our Youth; Combating Sex Trafficking in the Classroom



BY LINH TRAN AND MICHELLE HEATER

7 hours ago

 [Why you can trust Voice of OC](#)



Potential young human trafficking victims may be groomed online Credit: istockphoto

Imagine a predator lurking in plain sight, unseen in the virtual playgrounds where our youth spend much of their time. The predators use a calculated approach to lure and groom youth, making them believe they can be friends. This approach is one of the common ways our youth find themselves victims of sex trafficking—a grim reality where young lives are bartered behind screens, sometimes right inside our homes—[which became even more pervasive throughout the long, isolating months of the pandemic](#). In Orange County, we're continually working to confront this issue head on, addressing children and teens' silent cries for connection and attention that traffickers exploit. Technology used to further exploit the vulnerable and the ease of online access by youths 24 hours a day outpaced our ability to learn what is happening before it actually happens and then teach approaches to safety to the support systems surrounding our youths as a countermeasure. At the heart of this fight is the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) and its many community partners, striving to turn the tide on this crisis.

Sex trafficking is a very specific and devastating kind of human trafficking. It's the act of manipulating or forcing anyone into selling their bodies for sex acts. The vulnerability often begins with a simple, human need for connection. Traffickers, skilled in deception, present themselves as confidants to youth who crave the attention that the traffickers readily give them. This begins seemingly as a friendship at first, and quickly morphs into a relationship with a great power imbalance.

This is happening right here in Orange County. According to the OCHTTF's 2023 Human Trafficking Victim Report, in 2021 and 2022 420 victims were identified and supported, 32% of whom were minors. These youths, often from already marginalized communities, suffer most profoundly, becoming statistics in a report when they should be thriving in our community. The urgency to act is underscored by a stark reality: the younger the child, the more susceptible they are, and the deeper the scars of trafficking will run. Through these tragic scenarios these young victims have endured, and it is apparent that a focus on prevention is paramount because of the **“revolving door of similar stories of exploitation and history of abuse.”**

The **California Healthy Youth Act** (2016) requires all students to learn about human trafficking and healthy relationships at least twice in their academic careers. Yet, despite the law's good intentions, implementation has been difficult. Many educators grapple with the complex subject matter, while students, left to glean information from sensational media or Hollywood versions of a story, remain dangerously uninformed. This is a missed opportunity to empower a generation with the tools they need to navigate a world where threats no longer lurk in the shadows. The chance to demonstrate the power of positive relationships with adults and youth for our young people is within our reach yet the majority of us are engulfed in the digital world ourselves.

There is a beacon of hope. Starting last year, OCHTTF, in partnership with 24 local nonprofit resource organizations and the Orange County Department of Education, rallied to present critical information for young students across 23 middle schools with the “Know More, Do Better” prevention event, which yielded staggering success. The innovative educational approach and engagement strategies transcended traditional teaching, empowering impressionable middle schoolers with how to define, recognize and respond to the threats of unhealthy relationships and trafficking dangers — even surpassing the goals set by the California Healthy Youth Act.

This event's program created a transformative experience that educated and empowered our Orange County youth. Through a combination of survivor stories, interactive activities and critical discussions, students learned the importance of self-worth and the power of saying “no” to protect themselves and their peers. Teachers, too, learned how much this issue impacts their students as relationships are the biggest socialization struggle that teens face online and in-person, ensuring the seeds of this knowledge would continue to grow and spread throughout their schools.

The outcome data is a testament to their efforts: Knowledge about trafficking among students soared by 50% when the prevention curriculum continued inside the classrooms, and the ability to seek help saw similar growth. These are more than numbers; they are the whispers of a revolution in prevention work. As the revolution progresses, more youth will be equipped with the tools they need to keep themselves and their peers safe.

Yet we must push further. The prevalence of online grooming and peer recruitment tactics calls for a proactive and intentional educational stance. It's imperative that school administrators, counselors, nurses, resource officers and teachers elevate the quality of human trafficking education beyond a state mandate to a moral imperative. The

resources from OCHTTF and its community partners—a trove of knowledge, experience and compassion—stand ready to aid schools in this crucial mission.

The call to action is clear: We must support our educators to engage deeply with the materials and expertise offered by OCHTTF and its invaluable partner organizations to ensure that the information imparted is accurate, evidence-based and can guide schools on what the next steps must be if human trafficking is suspected. It's about equipping our youth with discernment and confidence, not through fear, but through connection and empathy.

It's time for a united front focused on prevention, where everyone commits to nurturing an environment where safety is synonymous with knowledge, and education is an imperative step in dismantling the business of human trafficking.

Compliance by law is a good place to start, but let's strive for excellence in our pursuit of safeguarding the next generation. Let's make Orange County not just a hub of education, but a stronghold against exploitation. Together, we can ensure that every child knows they have a network of trust and safety to turn to—a network that is strong enough to break the invisible chains of trafficking before they ever have a chance to lock in place.

***Linh Tran**, Task Force Administrator & Supervisor, Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force and Waymakers;*

Michelle Heater, Program Director, Victim Assistance Programs, Waymakers

Opinions expressed in community opinion pieces belong to the authors and not Voice of OC.

Voice of OC is interested in hearing different perspectives and voices. If you want to weigh in on this issue or others please email opinions@voiceofoc.org.