

Editorial
April 21, 2004
The Arizona Republic

Hidden victims of trafficking suffer modern-day slavery

This year marks the 24th anniversary of the official commemoration of National Crime Victims' Rights Week (April 18-24, 2004) and we share an important opportunity to recognize a special group of victims who live and work in our communities but often are hidden beneath their cultural identities, unable to express their pain or ask for help.

These are victims of human trafficking, who suffer in silence in slavlike conditions of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation in communities across the country, including Phoenix.

Each year 800,000 to 900,000 women, men and children are forced into this modern-day slavery, including 18,000 to 20,000 victims brought into the United States, according to a 2003 U.S. Government estimate. Trafficking of humans is estimated to be the second-largest criminal industry in the world after drug dealing, and is the fastest growing.

Arizona is fertile ground for human trafficking because of the state's large number of undocumented residents and its emergence as a major transportation route for illegal immigration.

Human trafficking is a hidden evil that results in enormous human misery. Victims tell us how their passports, money and identification are confiscated by the traffickers as they are forced into prostitution, pornography, migrant farm labor, domestic servitude, sex entertainment or sweatshop labor.

Victims of trafficking exist in towns and communities throughout the United States, in a \$13 billion-per-year global industry, according to State Department estimates- including \$7 billion in the illicit-sex industry.

President Bush, in a speech to the United Nations, said the world must not tolerate human trafficking. He stated: "The victims of sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life- an underground of brutality and lonely fear. Those who create these victims and profit from their suffering must be severely punished. Those who patronize this industry debase themselves and deepen the misery of others. And governments that tolerate this trade are tolerating a form of slavery."

It is unlikely that victims of trafficking will be found and rescued in significant numbers until the American public gains a much greater awareness of the horror of this inhumanity. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is using a National Crime Victims' Rights Week to launch a public awareness campaign in Phoenix and two other cities aimed at persons most likely to come in contact with victims.

As part of this campaign, HHS' Administration for Children and Families is creating new resources so the public will recognize the signs of human trafficking and learn how to take action. To ensure victims of human trafficking receive fast, safe and reliable help, The Trafficking Information and Referral Hotline, 1-888-373-7888, has been established, enabling victims to be referred to pre-screened aid organizations in their area.

The Web site, www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking, serves as an information clearinghouse for law enforcement officials as well as health and social service providers in their efforts to help victims of trafficking.

Human trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation is a big business that generates enormous profit for traffickers.

By making communities more vigilant and by telling traffickers their atrocities will not be tolerated, the messages being conveyed that American rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness must be given to victims of human trafficking.

The writer is the assistant secretary for children and families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Campaign against human trafficking

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) rolls out its public awareness campaign this week to combat human trafficking. Phoenix is one of three cities nationally to get special training and resources to recognize and react to human trafficking.

Information hotline

If you think you have come in contact with a victim of human trafficking, call 1-888-373-7888.

Web site

www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking