

Veil removed from human trafficking issue in Tahoe

By Lesia Witkowsky

Human trafficking isn't something that just happens in other places. It's an issue in Lake Tahoe.

Dylan Sullivan spoke about human trafficking as it relates to South Lake Tahoe at the Soroptimist International Tahoe Sierra meeting April 10. She dispelled many misconceptions of human trafficking and stressed the importance of addressing the issue in El Dorado County.

"Because it's a painful thing to talk about we want to put our heads in the sand and pretend it's not happening," Sullivan said. "But it's happening in this town. We as a group need to say out loud, 'We know this is happening and it's unacceptable.'"



Dylan Sullivan talks about human trafficking on April 10. Photo/Lesia Witkowsky

Sullivan is a commissioner for El Dorado County Superior Court, where she hears family law, Child Protective Services, unlawful detainers, traffic, and restraining order cases.

She explained that runaway children are often the biggest

victims of human trafficking in El Dorado County because of their vulnerability. They come from homes where they have either been sexually or physically assaulted, or both. Those children have a need for someone to care about them, and human traffickers try to fill that void similar to the way gangs recruit new members. According to Sullivan, the average age for runaways involved in human trafficking is 12 to 14.

"We remember being 12, 13 and 14 and thinking that we understood everything in life. And we know 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds, and we look at them and see how innocent they are.... It is not acceptable for us to not get up and do something about a 12-year-old being prostituted," Sullivan said.

She offered advice on how to improve the situation locally by explaining that when a community gets behind a child, that child has the means to become successful. Instead of treating victims of human trafficking as criminals, they should be looked at as people who need the services of a dependency court and not the punishment of a delinquency court.

"I was an at-risk youth," Sullivan said. "I was a child that had serious issues in my household and I knew at a very young age that I had to take personal responsibility to change my situation. I thought long and hard about how I knew that because I want to be able to follow it up and give it to kids that I see are in crisis."

A missing person's report along with a warrant should be filed when a runaway goes missing so when police pick him up, he will be treated like a dependent and not a delinquent. Sullivan said El Dorado County is leading the state in this issue.

Sullivan also listed a number of actions that individuals can take to help victims of human trafficking. These include being informed, being prepared to help and reporting any suspicious activity to legal authorities.

“It’s something that we all need to hear,” Susan Baker, a Soroptimist member and former head of Mt. Tallac High School said about Sullivan’s presentation. “This issue is alive and well in our community and it’s going to take our community to address this. It can’t be just law enforcement, or just CPS, or just the courts. As a community we have to really be aware.”