Human trafficking a problem in Lake Tahoe

By Linda Fine Conaboy

STATELINE – Not many people spend much time thinking about human sex trafficking. It's often a daunting and maybe even intangible topic. Just exactly what is human sex trafficking?

Law enforcement focuses on the human aspect of the topic, identifying human trafficking as the primary vehicle, and defining it as the recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through force, fraud or coercion.

There can be commercial sex trafficking such as domestic servitude, agricultural farm laborers can be illegally obtained and there are other work environments where employees may be coerced illegally such as at hotels, sweatshops and even forestry jobs. Human trafficking is often described as modern day slavery and as such is an immensely underreported crime.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Michelle Rodriguez gave a talk April 29 to Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe at Harrah's Lake Tahoe. The federal prosecutor is well schooled in the topic of human sex trafficking. Her presentation was titled Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Minors: A Federal Perspective.



Michelle Rodriguez, assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of California, says human trafficking is an issue in Lake Tahoe. Photo/Linda Fine Conaboy

When describing the role of the pimp in human sex trafficking, Rodriguez displayed a photo of a stereotypical person dressed in white fur from head to toe, puffing on a big cigar, and leering at the camera.

There's a new face for the pimp now, she said. He's usually a regular, run-of-the-mill person – and doesn't have to be male. The new pimp is typically younger, gang affiliated and may have a reliance on drugs and alcohol. And this person can have direct ties to the families of the girls with whom he or she becomes involved.

The astronomical use and acceptance of social media makes it easy for primarily young girls to be recruited into a life they would probably not choose had they been schooled in the perils that await them by logging onto some of the questionable sites constantly popping up. Even legitimate locations such as Facebook can hold danger for those who are young and easily led. In other words, anyone with access to a computer or a smart phone can be recruited. In the past, Rodriguez said, recruitment was normally by word-of-mouth – not anymore.

She pointed out that boys can also become victims, although fewer males than females are victims of human sex traffickers. Why? Because prime recruitment time happens when girls seem to be rebelling, discovering their sexuality or have a bad life at home. Not that boys don't have a problem, Rodriguez said, but girls more so. Those who feel underappreciated with no strong parental role model or guidance tend to be the most vulnerable.

Pimps are always looking for a fresh face, she said. They can find them, besides via social media, at bus stops or shelters, through others, in the mall or even at school.

Other offenses falling under this genre include engaging in pornography and/or circulating photos of it. Receipt, distribution and possession of child pornography is a crime. There is a lot of this type of activity at South Lake Tahoe, Rodriguez said.

"It's a fiendish activity," she said. "It's a compulsion and some people are wired that way. They can't stop themselves.

"But it is still a crime. There is a very graphic law that describes this. Sometimes a person will move into a home, but with designs on a specific family member. When these cases are being prosecuted, even the sexual act must be proven."

Additionally, when a sex trafficker is finally apprehended, it's a laborious process to establish a case and to prosecute them. It then becomes the role of the prosecutor to identify the elements of the specific violation and to present the facts to establish each element.

The Lake Tahoe Basin has a human sex trafficking problem. People come here looking for minors, Rodriguez said.

"It's an ongoing problem and we all have to be vigilant for it. South Lake Tahoe is not immune from the same social ills and criminal activities that other communities face. They may

appear to be rarer here, but it’s not that they’re not here,” Rodriguez said. “People have sexual interests and some are not healthy and are criminal. South Lake Tahoe is not insulated, it would be absurd to think that it is. So being vigilant is no less a concern in South Lake Tahoe than in other communities.”

Some of the signs that a person may be at risk or being held against her will include:

· Evidence of being controlled

· Visible signs of physical abuse

· Recently from a foreign country

· Non-English speaking

· Transient residency

· No engagement with the community

· Afraid to talk

· Runs away.

Signs a person may be a victim of sex trafficking:

· Tattoos reflective of a pimp

· Advertising on websites

· Older boyfriend (or girlfriend)

· Drug or alcohol abuse

· Unusual gifts.

After Rodriguez’s talk, there was a round-table discussion about human trafficking in South Lake Tahoe.

The group identified several key needs. They include:

- A need for more foster homes
- Emergency placement sites
- Specialized treatment
- More public information on this issue
- What can be done when a problem is detected
- A need for children aging out of foster care
- Prevention and awareness of online solicitation

“I would like the coalition to meet within two weeks to decide where we want to go with this. We need to get our feet on the ground and do something. We’re not clear yet what it is, but at least we’re headed in the right direction,” Cindy Archer, Soroptimist president, told *Lake Tahoe News*.