Educating people about human trafficking in Tahoe

By Alysone Hussmann

The question I get asked the most when sharing that I'm a member of PATH (Partners Against the Trafficking of Humans) is: Is human trafficking happening here in South Lake Tahoe? The answer is yes, although solid numbers are hard to come by.

Recently, it was reported in local media that 14 people were arrested and one 17 year old girl rescued from a trafficking ring in El Dorado County that included South Lake Tahoe, Placerville, and El Dorado Hills. This sting operation began by looking at escort and dating sites on the internet, one of the main ways that traffickers target young girls and boys.

In an article by Awaken (an anti-trafficking organization based in Reno), "Mapping Commercial Sexual Exploitation around Reno," Lake Tahoe is a hot spot for sex trafficking. It is part of the Highway 50 corridor from San Francisco, Sacramento, to South Lake Tahoe, and an easy cross-over state lines into Nevada. According to the Human Trafficking Initiative Data Science Lab, in 2016 there was one case of trafficking at Emerald Bay, 200-225 cases in Lake Tahoe, with 50-55 cases specifically in South Lake Tahoe, and 900-1,000 in Reno.

In the United States alone, it is estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 people are trafficked annually. According to a report by the Polaris Project, who maintains a national human trafficking hotline number, they had 8,742 cases of human trafficking reported to them in 2016 – a 35 percent increase over 2015. These identified cases comprise the largest available data set on human trafficking in the

U.S., but is estimated to be significantly underestimated, as many are not aware of the national hotline number (Hotline Number: 888.373.7888). In 2016, sex trafficking first started 49 percent of the time between the ages of 12-17, with the average age being age 18.

Globally, it is estimated that there are 4.8 million victims of sex trafficking, according to the International Labor Organization. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by human trafficking, also called modern slavery, accounting for 28.7 million or 71 percent of the overall total. More disturbing, is the estimate that one in four children is a victim of modern slavery, with 21 percent of the total victims in this category being children who were commercially sexual exploited. The average length of time of forced sexual exploitation is two years.

So how do traffickers find their victims? They use social media sites and online advertisements to market minors and trafficked victims. These traffickers' tactics are very sophisticated and persuasive. According to the Polaris Project, the top recruitment tactic (36 percent in 2016) is by developing an intimate partner relationship (called a Romeo pimp) with their potential victim. Familial trafficking represents 21 percent of the tactics – yes, parents traffic their children. And 11 percent are promised a job (such as modeling). Traffickers lurk at public recreation facilities, and casinos, (basically wherever teenagers like to hang out), and large sporting events are also a hot spot for trafficking.

What can we do about human trafficking in our community? Local, South Lake Tahoe Coalition PATH (Partners Against the Trafficking of Humans), partners with other organizations to bring awareness and education to the South Lake Tahoe community. Our **website** is updated regularly. PATH's mission is to increase community awareness of human trafficking through prevention education. For two years we have partnered with 3 Strands Global to educate the ninth-grade classes at South

Tahoe High School, and we are working to expand that program, in an age appropriate manner to 5th-, 7th-, 9th-, and 11th-graders.

To increase community awareness – PATH is sponsoring an event, in partnership with Live Violence Free and Tahoe Youth & Family Services, as January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. There will be a short film about human trafficking and how it can happen in a small rural town with a straight A student. It will be followed by a panel from our partner 3 Strands Global (who provides our school prevention education), and they will share a survivor's story from someone right here in El Dorado County. The event will take place on Jan. 30 at 6:30pm at the Duke Theatre at Lake Tahoe Community College for a $5 donation to PATH (no one will be turned away).

We encourage all members of the community to attend, especially parents of middle and high school kids, teachers, health care workers, and anyone interested in learning more about human trafficking.

Again, the National Human Trafficking Hotline Number is 888.373.7888.