

Rotary Club forum sheds light on sex trafficking

By Jake Busch

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KENNESAW — Sex trafficking is ubiquitous, even though many people fail to notice it.

That is why the Rotary Club of North Cobb hosted “The Truth About Sex Trafficking In Our Community,” a forum this week that brought together Cobb leaders, concerned citizens and groups combating sex trafficking in the county and across Georgia.

North Cobb Rotary member Hicks Malonson is an ambassador for Rescuing Hope, a Marietta-based nonprofit fighting sex trafficking through educational programming and support for survivors.

“It’s a hard subject,” Malonson told a crowd of about 50 people gathered at the Ben Robertson Community Center. “It is happening in your community.”

‘FROM SELLING DRUGS TO SELLING PEOPLE’

Human trafficking has gained greater attention in Georgia since 2019, when Gov. Brian Kemp established the Georgians for Refuge, Action, Compassion, and Education Commission, chaired by his wife, Georgia first lady Marty Kemp.

The commission, composed of public officials, experts on human trafficking, and representatives from law enforcement and advocacy groups, is tasked with combating human trafficking in the state. Georgia’s heightened focus on the issue extends to law enforcement agencies.

Georgia Assistant Attorney General Kaitlyn Salinas works for Georgia’s statewide Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit, created in 2019 as the first of its kind in the U.S.

According to the office of Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr, human trafficking is regarded as the fastest growing criminal enterprise worldwide. Human trafficking crimes involve “the act of compelling or coercing a person’s labor, services or

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Marietta Police Lt. David Collins, flanked by FBI Special Agent Josh Norris, left, and Kennesaw Detective Daniel Wood, right, speaks during a panel on Tuesday at the Ben Robertson Community Center in Kennesaw.

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commercial sex acts, or using children under the age of 18 for commercial sex acts,” per Carr’s office.

Salinas, speaking at the forum, noted that it is far less likely nowadays for traffickers to walk through an airport or hotel with large quantities of cocaine, but it is much easier for them to walk through either with a young person they are trafficking.

“We’re seeing a shift in traffickers switching from selling drugs to selling people,” Salinas said.

Salinas said that her unit initiated 25 human trafficking cases, investigated and prosecuted 51 defendants and rescued and assisted 107 victims in 2021.

On average, victims of human trafficking are 6th to 8th grade girls, and there are red flags indicating someone might be a victim of trafficking that anyone can identify, Salinas said.

A person appearing malnourished or lacking hygiene could be a potential victim of trafficking. A person, especially a girl in middle school, who possesses unexplained gifts or money might also be a victim, Salinas said.

If an individual is deferential to another person, oftentimes identified as a relative (“aunt” or “uncle” are common titles), before responding to someone else in a conversation, is “one of the biggest” red flags, according to Salinas.

“You’re never going to have one person who has all these red flags,” Salinas said. “There might be one here, one there, something that’s not on this list.”

COBB’S FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Susan Norris, the executive director of Rescuing Hope and a member of the GRACE commission, moderated a panel of local “first responders” to human trafficking at Tuesday’s forum.

Ana Murphy, the school social work supervisor for the Cobb County School District, said it is difficult to identify whether a student is being trafficked. She noted it is “a major red flag for us” when students are frequently absent from school, a trend that worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Norris said one study showed a 40% jump in trafficking during the pandemic because students were online, not only in class, but socializing with other students and, potentially, traffickers.

“If it’s connected to the internet, it is a device that invites bad actors into your home and into your child’s life, whether you know it or not,” Norris said.

Julia Bossie, the director of nursing for emergency services at Wellstar Douglas Hospital, said that many emergency department personnel are shocked when they learn about the red flags of human trafficking and realize they had patients who showed those signs.

On the law enforcement side, Marietta Police Lt. David Collins did not mince words about trafficking in his jurisdiction.

“In the city of Marietta, we have a sex trafficking problem,” Collins said.

He said the problem is “insidious” and “not what you think it is,” happening right in front of people without them even realizing it.

Collins said it is not limited to extended stays on Delk Road and is present even in upscale neighborhoods around the city.

Throughout the night, Collins, Norris and others stressed traffickers do not discriminate between stable and unstable home environments. Children who are trafficked, they said, might have a long history of foster care and come from broken homes, or they may live in a stable home with two parents.

Kennesaw Police Detective Daniel Wood explained that “grooming,” when adults reach out to children and coerce them into sending sexually explicit material, is more pervasive in Kennesaw than overt sex trafficking.

“The biggest thing is just trying to get ahead of that, you know, parents checking their kids’ phones, making sure you know what your child is doing online,” Wood said.

Wood said it might be uncomfortable for parents to track their children’s internet activity, but it is necessary to combat grooming. Wood said he even uses the Urban Dictionary, focused on slang words and phrases, to decipher what children say online and how it might be used to take advantage of them.

Acworth Police Chief Jesse Evans said his department has not identified any sex trafficking cases in the city, though he noted the issue is widespread in metro Atlanta and Georgia.

“From the law enforcement perspective...I think what we’re seeing is an increased partnership, and the increase in the ability for us to get together and talk about these things and know that it is not gonna stop at one county line, it’s not gonna stop at a city line, it’s definitely a community issue,” Evans said.

HOW TO JOIN THE FIGHT

Despite success stories about combating sex trafficking that law enforcement and public health professionals shared Tuesday, Norris said it is crucial for everyday citizens to get involved in ending sex trafficking. She identified three settings where action should be taken: at home, in the community, and in the broader fight.

“First and foremost, start talking to your kids about sex from the moment they start talking,” Norris said. “I promise you, if you’re not talking about it, somebody’s going to talk to them about it, and you want them to hear it from you and through your worldview and not from the person on the other side of whatever piece of technology you put in their hands.”

Norris went down a list of other actions to be taken at home, including giving body parts their proper terms, establishing “safety words” children can communicate to parents when in an uncomfortable situation and instituting family rules for technology so that parents are aware of what their children are doing online.

At the community level, Norris said adults should be mentoring youth on how to fulfill their potential and steering them away from negativity. They should also host youth book clubs (Rescuing Hope will provide books for free) and invite speakers from Rescuing Hope and other groups against sex trafficking to talk with children and adults alike.

Norris encouraged attendees to become involved in volunteering for Rescuing Hope and other anti-trafficking organizations at the forum, like Out of Darkness (www.outofdarkness.org), Wellspring Living (www.wellspringliving.org) and The Table on Delk (www.thetableondelk.org).

More information about Rescuing Hope can be found at www.rescuinghope.com.

For help or to report suspicions of human trafficking call 911, the Georgia Coalition to Combat Human Trafficking at 866-363-4842 or the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 888-373-7888 or text 233-733.



From left: Ana Murphy, Julia Bossie, Special Agent Josh Norris, Lt. David Collins, Detective Daniel Wood and Chief Jesse Evans participate in a panel about sex trafficking on Tuesday, Jan. 10, at the Ben Robertson Community Center in Kennesaw.

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