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Center Aims to Bring Human Trafficking Out of the Shadows

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BY DANIEL SCHERE



OPENING THE SAFE CENTER IN COLLEGE PARK ARE, FROM LEFT, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND PRESIDENT WALLACE LOH, SEN. BEN CARDIN (D-MD.), STATE TREASURER NANCY KOPP, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR SUSAN ESSERMAN, REP. CHRIS VAN HOLLEN (D-MD.) AND UMD.-BALTIMORE PRESIDENT JAY PERMAN. (PHOTO BY DANIEL SCHERE)

It was a night ride with law enforcement about two years ago that opened Susan Esserman’s eyes to an invisible crisis in Prince George’s County, one she wants to be much more known: human trafficking.

Esserman, a Washington trade lawyer who previously served as the deputy U.S. trade ambassador during President Bill Clinton’s administration, had been asked to help craft legislation in India that would strengthen penalties for traffickers there. To prepare, she decided it would be beneficial first to study the problem in the United States.

What she found while driving through Hyattsville and College Park stuck with her.

“I’ve really been haunted by what I saw that evening,” she said. “There were certain areas of Prince George’s County where it was evident there were brothels in every other apartment with a man sitting in a window either looking out for customers or watching for the police.”

Esserman said at that point, she decided to take action, and to start she had to look no further than her own pro bono clients to find trafficking victims.

Maryland is considered to be a locus of human trafficking.

— *Susan Esserman, director, SAFE Center*

“I ended up getting quite a bit of referrals in Maryland, my home state, and it was really quite shocking that it could be happening in my backyard,” she said. “There was a real pattern in the matters that I was involved in, and that was that our clients were successful in achieving rights and benefits, but they had difficulty recovering [from the trauma] in any meaningful way. To truly recover from the trauma of trafficking involves a multidisciplinary effort.”

Human trafficking is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes as the recruitment or abduction of people through coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation, prostitution, slavery or other practices. There were 118 cases reported in Maryland in 2015, according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center. Nationally, in 2014 there were more than 3,000 human trafficking cases reported, according to government agencies. However, estimates of the number of victims in the United States reach the hundreds of thousands.

Poor sections of Prince George’s County are vulnerable to sex trafficking, Esserman said. Women, especially immigrants, in particular are often preyed upon by pimps who promise them work but force them into slavery and prostitution.

“Maryland is considered to be a locus of human trafficking in part because of the highways, but the areas that I visited are hidden from view,” she said.

The stories Esserman heard from trafficking survivors and the scenes she witnessed during the police ride along spurred her to found the Support, Advocacy, Freedom and Empowerment Center in College Park, of which she is the director. The newly opened center, near the University of Maryland, brings together support services for survivors that include social work, legal and health components.

The center works with both the College Park- and Baltimore-based UMd. social work and law schools. It is funded through private donations and MPowering the State, a partnership of the two campuses to expand research and business development opportunities.

At the SAFE Center's opening ceremony on May 9, Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) praised the universities for leading the charge in solving what has become a national epidemic.

"For America to have credibility on this issue, we have to take care of this issue at home first," he said. "We know what you do here will not only help those in our state of Maryland, but we know that will give us the information we need to shape our national policy."

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), a candidate for Maryland's other Senate seat, echoed Cardin.

"It is incumbent upon all of us to bring all of the resources that we have to bear in attacking this issue," he said.

Richard Barth, dean of the University of Maryland-Baltimore School of Social Work, said students take courses in addressing the issues of sexual assault, abandonment, imprisonment and trauma that he thinks will be helpful in assisting victims of trafficking.

"Our clinical students get very good background in general when it comes to working with traumatized individuals," he said.

Gregory Ball, dean of UMd.'s College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, said students will be particularly effective in assisting the victims, who tend to be in their teens and 20s.

"A lot of times these women are not too far in age from [the students] and they've been caught in a trap. And students feel very empathetic toward them and that they can make a difference," he said.

Ball said he is excited about the prospect of students applying what they've learned in the classroom to help deal with problems confronting the community.

"I think this represents a good example of how people in traditional social science fields who try to understand social phenomena can bring that experience in trying to solve social problems," he said. "That's what a university does."

dschere@midatlanticmedia.com