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Battle rages over human trafficking

Courts, nonprofits help local victims recover and thrive

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After nearly 13 years, Paris Gotti decided she couldn't do it anymore.

The temporary job meant to fuel her vision of opening a Rochester hair salon had dissolved into a hell of drugs, hotel rooms and strangers in faraway cities; all under the control of a man who promised her money and then wouldn't let her leave.

But this year, she managed to call a friend for help from a California hotel, break free of prostitution and reunite with her family in the Rochester area. She hadn't spoken to them in months.

"I just had enough," she said. "And now, I get to start all over."

Human trafficking refers to situations in which people are recruited and then exploited in the form of forced sex work or other labor. It affects virtually every low-wage industry, and often victims were tricked into thinking they will have a stable, legal job that they can vacate whenever they want.



Paris Gotti of Rochester tells her story at the Angels of Mercy boutique. The nonprofit organization helps those who were victims of human trafficking or prostitution.

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Shopper Gloria Medina of Rochester looks through clothes with volunteer Judy Morabito of Victor at the Angels of Mercy boutique.

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An estimated 17,500 people are trafficked into or around the U.S. each year, and the industry's proceeds measure in the billions globally.

Federal and state laws, including New York's Anti-Trafficking Law in 2007, have given prosecutors and investigators tools to target traffickers and levy heavier penalties. A federally funded human trafficking task force that covers 17 counties in western New York was assembled a decade ago.

The task force model allows lawyers, law enforcement and social service providers to work together to shut down human trafficking situations in the region — “this is one of the few multi-disciplinary efforts that are out there,” said Amy Fleischauer, director of survivor support services at the International Institute of Buffalo.

“That’s really the only way that we’re going to be able to successfully combat the crime.”

While victims are still typically charged in connection with human trafficking busts in the region, convictions of traffickers are rare.

“We don’t actually see a lot of convictions for human trafficking, which is fine if (traffickers) are being charged with fraud or money laundering or promoting prostitution. ... At least they’re being convicted of something that gives them some kind of jail time,” said Fleischauer.

New York’s focus on the issue allows officials to more quickly identify where these crimes are occurring across the state, but human trafficking is a nebulous issue.

“This is by far the most hidden crime I’ve ever worked on,” said Fleischauer.

Women charged in suburbs have few ways to avoid charges

One of the largest trends in addressing human trafficking nationally is the shift away from charging the potential victims with prostitution or other crimes.

That's easier said than done, said Fleischauer — building a successful case against a trafficker is more difficult than prosecuting a simple prostitution charge, and traffickers are adept at avoiding detection. Also, cases have historically been built largely on the testimony of victims, who may give inconsistent accounts of their experiences, depending on the trauma they've endured.

Prosecutors and law enforcement are trying to get away from that approach, hoping that they can prosecute traffickers successfully with other evidence, even if they net a conviction on a lesser charge, she said.

Over the past several years, some victims are being referred to courts, such as the Rochester Human Trafficking Intervention Court, where their charges can be vacated after they complete substance abuse treatment, receive counseling or find housing.

“I consider my court to be a combination mental health court, drug court, housing court and treatment court because those coming in have a multitude of problems,” said City Court Judge Ellen Yacknin, who presides over Rochester's Human Trafficking Intervention Court.

Those convicted of prostitution are typically given about 60 days of jail time, and may go back into the trafficking cycle once released.

Individuals charged with prostitution or related charges in the city of Rochester have a chance to get those charges dismissed, based on goals they set for themselves — characterized by Yacknin as “baby steps” — before entry into the three- to five-month court program.

After three years running the program, Yacknin found the success rate with any given individual is low at first, because often victims don't trust her to help them and don't show up for court dates or treatment.

“But it keeps us all going when we have success stories,” she said. “Even women who are rearrested, or who have shown that they haven't attended counseling ... we do work with them for as long as they're telling me that they are serious about getting help.”

But women charged with trafficking-related crimes in Rochester's suburbs currently don't have any way to avoid charges — Rochester's program accepts only those charged in the city. Town and village courts can still refer women to treatment avenues, “but there is no central way for them to participate,” said Yacknin.

Buffalo's human trafficking court is already taking cases from nearby suburbs, with the hope that the trend will spread across the state, said Fleischauer. The overarching goal would be to work with law enforcement to identify possible victims of a trafficking operation before the victims are charged with crimes.

People in poverty easy targets for traffickers

About 90 percent of those trafficked in sex work start as minors, said Yacknin. About half of the trafficking victims in the U.S. are domestic and are working in their hometown or traveling to other cities, while the other half are international and perhaps coming into the U.S. on the pretense of legal employment, said Fleischauer.

Three women with Chinese visas were charged earlier this month in connection with a Gates massage parlor that was allegedly part of a prostitution operation. Gates police saw an adult entertainment ad on Backpage.com that directed customers to Lilac Spa on Lyell Avenue. The women were charged with practicing a profession without a license, and one was charged with prostitution.

The case had the markings of a human trafficking situation, said Gates Police Chief Jim VanBrederode, as the women charged were international, did not speak English and were brought in from the New York City area.

Trafficking cases are unearthed in Gates about once a year, and police are getting better at identifying them, as they often incorporate the massage parlor model, he said. The internet enables housewives or sex trafficking operations alike to advertise in real time and get almost an immediate response.

“You can be up in business in an hour or two,” he said. “What’s sad (is) that’s how many men are out there on their lunch breaks from work, looking for a quick thing.”

Individuals targeted for trafficking are most likely in poverty, said Fleischauer, and most low-wage industries, including construction, farming and hotel work, have the potential for worker exploitation.

In international cases, victims are often legally in the U.S., said Melanie Blow of the Rochester Regional Coalition against Human Trafficking.

“But agents make sure they don’t understand their rights,” said Blow. “They’re kept isolated — (traffickers) do everything they can to keep them from assimilating.”

Nonprofits provide support system

In addition to this treatment, trafficked individuals are victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their traffickers, which presents challenges as victims re-enter mainstream life.

“A lot of times you see fear on their faces, they don’t have any self-esteem and they don’t feel worthy,” said Mary Jo Colligan of Angels of Mercy, a local nonprofit working to raise awareness of human trafficking and support victims of trafficking, domestic violence and drug use.

The organization helps clients find various treatment options to suit their needs and also runs a clothing boutique where women can shop for professional clothes for job interviews. Often the group's volunteers are some of the first to give victims encouragement and support without asking for something in return, said Colligan.

“It’s beautiful to see the difference take place, and for them to realize they can experience freedom and have the dignity they deserve,” she said.

Community members and parents can help prevent human trafficking by calling police to report strange work or living situations in their neighborhoods, and paying attention to mood or social changes in children, said Colligan — “Anywhere the kids are, the traffickers are,” she said.

Paris Gotti was a teenager when she left Rochester for New York City with the hopes of funding her hair salon back home.

“I thought this was the only way to make money,” she said. What she didn’t know is that she’d have to give nearly everything she made to her trafficker, who also forced her to do drugs and controlled what she did and how much contact she had with her family.

Gotti hopes to use her story to encourage individuals to stay away from potential trafficking situations, no matter how tempting the situation might seem.

“Some of these girls are brainwashed into thinking this is OK,” she said. “My job is to help them make the choice on their own, stand up for themselves like I did and run away from it.”

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Members of Sew’n Sews with Whitney Point United Methodist Church — from left, Sandy Priscott, Shirley Marks, Jean Ellis, Jean Glezen and Katie Roe — show some aprons they made after delivering 400 dresses at the Angels of Mercy boutique. The nonprofit organization helps those who were victims of human trafficking or prostitution.

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