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Raising awareness about local labor trafficking

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Monroe County, N.Y. - You might not think about it when you eat in a restaurant or shop in a local store, but local labor leaders want you to consider who built it and whether or not the labor was treated fairly.

Labor and police union leaders say it's happening right under our nose: Labor trafficking.

Leaders are focusing on construction sites such as a wholesale store in Henrietta, where they are hoping to investigate whether one of the contractors is trafficking undocumented workers and treating them poorly.

Police Union president Mike Mazzeo says detecting exploited workers is often hard to do.

"We kind of stumbled into it by an officer getting a call to a disturbance to a construction site and not really understanding what he had and not understanding what the rights were for the inspectors from the union to go on the site and to check for safety as well as undocumented workers and workers who are being exploited," said Mazzeo.

"It's difficult to get the evidence," said David Young, president of the Rochester Building and Construction Trades. "I'm hoping we get the position to have people investigate it intelligently, fairly, and humanely, respectfully."

Young said there are other sites around the area that are in question.

In 2014, the owner of the Super Buffet Chinese Restaurant in Henrietta was convicted of harboring illegal aliens and given 2 years' probation and ordered to pay a \$5,000 fine.

Western New York U.S. Attorney William Hochul says there have been three labor trafficking cases in our region, and restaurant worker cases are the biggest in Rochester.

"It seems like anywhere there's a demand for lower salaries, that's an area where we have to be focusing on because certainly that is what somebody that is the trafficker would concentrate on the ability to bring in lower cost workers," said Hochul.

A workshop was held at the Rochester Police Locust Club to raise awareness about labor trafficking, focusing on how to spot it and help victims. Among the panelists were leaders from the Worker Justice Center of New York, Building and Trades Council/IBEW 86 and the International Institute of Buffalo.

"The problem is with this is it's so veiled, so unknown to most people," Mazzeo points out.

Leaders say clues to watch out for include workers who aren't left to go out and about by themselves.

They're often subdued and are usually always in the presence of others.

"Those are some of the indicia we would look for as prosecutors to be able to prove forced fraud and coercion," Hochul said.

We reached out to the company and the general contractor on the work site for comment. Those calls have yet to be returned.

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