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Raising awareness of North Country human trafficking

Jan 19, 2015 — Human trafficking is a hidden crime. It is hard to see and hard to fight. Human trafficking is modern day slavery that traps men, women, and children. Many are forced to work hard labor without pay or become prostitutes.

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced new efforts to raise awareness about human trafficking in New York. Last week, state experts on human trafficking gathered at a taping of Public Eye with Jeff Cole at the WPBS studios in Watertown, N.Y.

Many of us are already familiar with human smuggling. That happens when a person is so desperate to leave their home country they pay or borrow thousands of dollars for someone to bring them to the United States.

Gonzalo Martinez de Vedia is the human trafficking expert with the Worker Justice Center of New York. He said human trafficking can be an easy next step for a smuggler. Gonzalo said, "They may find it more profitable to make them victims of human trafficking then customers of a smuggling business. It doesn't take much for that middle person, that smuggler, to decide they would rather put that person in a peonage situation then a situation where they can pay off that debt."

Martinez de Vedia is part of the North Country Human Trafficking Task Force. The group works alongside the Governor's office, advocacy organizations, the Department of Labor, and 12 other executive agencies to stop this kind of modern day slavery. Martinez de Vedia said they are typically illegal immigrants who work in hotels, restaurants, and in agriculture — industries located throughout northern New York. He said, "An entire community that is living in the margins of our agencies because they don't have the documentation to be able to engage."

Jim Spero, an agent in Buffalo with Homeland Security Investigations, said just because the North Country is remote and rural doesn't mean there is no human trafficking here. "The sad reality is, probably not. Human trafficking doesn't know any boundaries. No community is immune to human trafficking."

Martinez de Vedia said once traffickers hit the highways, they can go anywhere. They rely on threats of violence to control their victims and keep them from seeking help. That is part of the reason this crime has been hard to identify and report. He said many of the trafficking cases are hidden in plain sight. "It's frustrating for services and law enforcements as well to find out that many cases they had contact with hospitals, school, law enforcement, NGOs, and this went on for years and year before someone was able to get to the bottom of their story and realize they didn't have control of the conditions in which they lived and worked under."

Martinez de Vedia said police, non-profits, and agencies have to work together to uncover these crimes. He said the task force will focus on education this month. They will help the public and local police learn to identify victims, the first step to shine light on a crime committed in the shadows.

You can tune into WPBS for Public Insight with Jeff Cole at 10 pm tonight for more discussion on human trafficking.

NOTE: This story has been corrected to amend a transcription error in Gonzalo De Vedia's quote.