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Outreach is turning the tide

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Law has been changed to allow victims more time to report abuse

By Anna Bitong

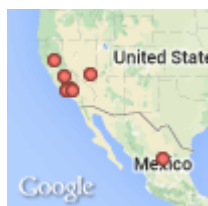
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EDUCATION—Detective James Langford of the Oxnard Police Department talks to a group of people about commercial sex trafficking in Ventura County at the Ventura County Community Foundation in Camarillo on April 24. Langford did not want his face shown because he occasionally goes undercover for the department.

MICHAEL COONS/Acorn Newspapers *Part three of a three-part series*

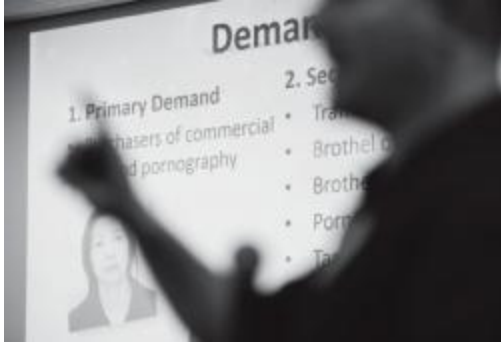
Last year, 11 victims of labor and sex trafficking in Ventura County called the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking in Los Angeles for help.



Where's the story?  12 Points Mentioned

All but one—a female sex trafficking victim—said they were victims of labor trafficking, seven men and three women with U.S., Mexican and Philippine citizenship who reported being abused in Camarillo, Simi Valley, Ventura, Oxnard and Port Hueneme.

Local law enforcement suspects there are many other trafficking victims who do not seek help.



OUT OF THE SHADOWS—Detective James Langford of the Oxnard Police Department shares information about the commercial and sex trafficking trade in Ventura County. Detective James Langford of the Oxnard Police Department said the victims usually fear their traffickers, a hurdle in finding and prosecuting them.

“Most female victims that are involved and interviewed are generally a bit apprehensive about disclosing facts of what’s going on because of fear of retaliation from their traffickers and because of fear of any type of retaliation to their family,” he said. “Sometimes they don’t say anything at all.”

Langford said that in Oxnard, which has a large population of farmworkers from other countries, there are internationally trafficked victims from Central and South America.

In a city like Thousand Oaks, he said, “it’s more of a domestic type of trafficking where pimps are taking females from the United States that are either runaways or fall victim to the pressures of a pimp and then pass through Thousand Oaks as part of their circuit that they go on.”

“Because Thousand Oaks is part of the 101 Freeway, it’s an easy stop along the 101 to find a hotel and run them out of that hotel for (a week), and then move on to the next city that’s along the freeway.”

Detective Guy Fadler of the Thousand Oaks Police Department said that the constant travel “is designed so that people don’t feel comfortable and don’t feel they can run off and tell someone. They don’t make any friends in that area. They’re not there long enough to develop these relationships and they can be victimized further.”

Fadler said sex trafficking is likely the most prevalent type of human trafficking in the county.

Most victims are trafficked between the ages of 11 and 14, he said. The Ventura County Behavioral Health clinic estimates that 60 percent of the females in its juvenile facility—which has an average of 20 girls at a time—are involved in commercial sexual exploitation.

It might take several years for them to realize they were exploited, but recent changes in state law and the statute of limitations give them more time to report their abuse, Fadler said.

“If someone down the road realizes, ‘I was victimized, this is what went on, this is who did it,’ they can come report that to law enforcement and action can be taken at that point,” he said.

And with increasing media coverage of human trafficking, Fadler said, “some of these victims are bound to come forward.”

A victim came forward in Thousand Oaks in December, he said.

“A patrol officer was doing good police work and happened to come into contact with someone as they were being delivered to basically a john (person paying for sex) in Thousand Oaks,” Fadler said. “The victim chose to disclose, and from there the investigation began.”

What about the victims who don’t speak up?

Ventura County prosecutor Maeve Fox said that victims’ silence “is always one of the biggest concerns” but may be overcome. She compared law enforcement’s growing awareness of human trafficking to the shifting view of domestic violence more than two decades ago.

“We are looking at these cases in a similar vein to the way that we looked at domestic violence cases 25 years ago,” Fox said. “I think the change that has come to law enforcement is very similar in nature to the change that took place in the law enforcement community when domestic violence came to the forefront.”

The abuse was seen then as a private matter between two people, she said, but the view of victims changed.

“When we all realized that wasn’t the case, that the women in these relationships many times were truly victims. It changed the way we prosecuted the cases,” Fox said. “(Now) sometimes we don’t even require the victim’s testimony. The challenges facing us in the human trafficking area are going to be similar to that.”

Looking for signs

Langford began training to investigate human trafficking cases in 2011.

“That’s when I put two and two together and realized that these things that I had (seen), some of them were signs of trafficking,” the detective said, “but I didn’t realize it before because I really didn’t know that it existed or what signs to look for.”

Since he learned to spot trafficking, he’s come across at least a dozen victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

“When you start investigating it and looking at it a little more thoroughly, you start to realize that there are signs of trafficking that are there,” Langford said, “such as a person being there against their will, indicators of them being moved around from place to place, when they’re not free to do what they want to do.”

What signs should the public look for?

Both Langford and Fadler advised the public to report frequent foot or vehicle traffic at residences.

In one case, Langford received tips that men were going in and out of an apartment in Oxnard, and a new female was brought to the apartment every week.

Police served a search warrant and confirmed that prostitution occurred. A male in the apartment was arrested for pimping, prosecuted and sent to prison.

The female victim interviewed by police refused to say what happened to her but said she had traveled from Mexico to Las Vegas to Oxnard.

“The girls would be shipped there by different transportation means and be housed there for the week,” Langford said. “They would leave, go to the next destination, and a new girl would take their place.”

Prosecuting traffickers

The Ventura County district attorney’s office has not yet filed a human trafficking charge against anyone, Fox said. But she said the D.A. “is interested in making sure that we know how to prosecute these cases.”

“We’re trying to get ahead of the curve,” she said. “We’re trying to educate ourselves on how to put these cases together . . . so if we do get these cases, if they are here, we can investigate them successfully and bring them to a prosecution.”

In 2011, Langford arrested a person for human trafficking, then a probation-eligible offense. Due to the weak penalty, the trafficking charge was dismissed and the perpetrator was charged with pimping, which carries a mandatory sentence of at least three years.

“Now the laws have changed, and trafficking laws in California mimic those of federal laws,” Langford said. “Now it’s a prison-eligible offense.”

Langford, Fadler and Fox have attended meetings of the Ventura County Coalition Against Human Trafficking, a band of law enforcement agencies and nonprofits that formed in January to create a countywide response to human trafficking.

"If something were to arise, we're all there to assist each other," Langford said.

The coalition may develop into a task force to become eligible for grants, but local law enforcement agencies would need to provide personnel to staff the task force, he said. His hope is that the coalition becomes a task force.

"With more information coming to light," Fox said, "with better education, with expertise coming to the field, I think we're taking a new look at the damage and destruction that these kinds of crimes cause both to victims of human trafficking and to more traditional prostitution cases."