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By Kate Seckinger/Gazette Reporter

Sex trafficking an alarming reality in region



Survivor Asia Graves, left, with Cassie McCracken, center, and Melanie Conte discuss how organizations like SAFE Inc. respond to commercial sexual exploitation of children in Schenectady. The women spoke at a conference at Schenectady County Community College earlier this month.

CAPITAL REGION — Slavery isn't just a thing of the past.

Human trafficking, or forcing a person through fraud or coercion to engage in commercial sex acts or labor services, is the most common form of modern-day slavery, according to fbi.gov.

SAFE Inc. of Schenectady, with the county Department of Social Services, works every day to end youth homelessness and sexual exploitation in the area.

“People often mistakenly think sex trafficking is just overseas and in major cities, but it’s right here,” said Melanie Puerto-Conte, SAFE’s resource developer and the former director of suicide prevention initiative with the state Office of Mental Health. “It’s here, and it’s been here a long, long time.”

Project SAFE has a safe house or shelter for homeless or runaway youth ages 16 to 20, and has evolved since it first opened in 1985. The organization offers food, clothing, shelter, counseling, life skills training, securing housing and other services to its male and female clients ages 12 to 35 who have been trafficked or are at risk.

Human trafficking

-- 50 percent of human trafficking victims are children

-- In the Capital Region, one out of three of child runaways will interact with a pimp within 48 hours of leaving home

-- Human trafficking is the third largest crime industry in the world

-- 52 percent of human trafficking recruiters are men and 42 percent are women

-- An estimated 27 million adults and 13 million children are victims of human trafficking worldwide

Source: SAFE Inc. of Schenectady

Schenectady has always been on the circuit for trafficking, Puerto-Conte said.

“We’re off the Thruway, and are right off of the intersection of where it meets 90,” she explained. “It’s just two hours from [New York City] and four hours to Buffalo. We’re right in the middle of it all, and this is happening right outside right under our noses.”

In the state this year, 201 human trafficking cases were reported as of Sept. 30, according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center.

In 2015, the majority were sex trafficking with 155 cases, and just under half of victims were minors, or children under 18, also according to the NHTRC.

Asia Graves, a survivor of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, was trafficked from age 16 to 19. She spoke at a human trafficking conference held at Schenectady County Community College earlier this month to raise awareness for human trafficking as a local issue.

“Up to 293,000 kids are at risk for being trafficked domestically,” Graves said. “For girls, the average age of entry into prostitution is 12 to 14 years old, and it’s between ages 9 to 11 for boys.”

Minors who are trafficked are often living in difficult circumstances at home such as abuse, or are in the foster care system or are runaways.

Nationwide, one out of three homeless youth will encounter a pimp within 72 hours of being out on the streets, Graves said.

Cassie McCracken, the executive director of SAFE, said the rate is even higher locally.

“Here in Schenectady, kids will interact with a pimp within the first 48 hours of being on the streets,” McCracken said. “They’re always vulnerable because a lot of the kids we’re finding are being exploited or trafficked are runaways from foster care, even though not all of them are.

“Adolescents are vulnerable anyway, but a lot of our kids we come into contact with have significant abuse in the household... that’s what’s leading them to run away and makes them vulnerable on the streets,” she added.

McCracken said even at 18, young adults are still at risk for being trafficked if they try to live on their own.

“We’ve had to call the police numerous times because we have people, either pimps or other women who work for them, walking up and down the street trying to get our kids as they’re going off the school or to job interviews,” she said.

Without the proper skills or ability to make it alone, homeless youth are often driven to engage in survival sex — trading sexual acts for basic needs such as food or clothes.

In Schenectady, Puerto-Conte said sex for heroin is also a major problem.

“Within the past 10 months, we’ve seen a huge increase in the trafficking and heroin issue,” Puerto-Conte said. “There’s a strategy in getting youth addicted, but people need to understand that victims of trafficking are not participating willingly.”

The state has an Anti-Trafficking Law that establishes human trafficking as a crime that protects survivors, and mandates that confirmed victims are eligible for services and benefits.

“While the extent of sex trafficking enterprises is difficult to quantify, there have been reports of pimps in the city of Schenectady who operate juveniles,” said Paul Holstein, a media representative and chief division council for the Albany Field Office of the FBI. “The FBI has worked and will continue to work with our state and local partners to conduct operations in Schenectady County to identify victims of trafficking and to bring perpetrators to justice.”

Barbara Dworkin, the vice president of the board of SAFE, said per capita, the rate of trafficking is higher in the Capital Region than in New York City.

“We’re worse than New York City, and people don’t even think it happens here,” Dworkin said. “Trafficking affects all classes of people — all ethnicities, religions, genders and sexual orientations. So many people have a stereotype of what it looks like, but it’s all strata of society.”

Graves said people should be on the look out for suspicious activity, and report it.

“Trafficking happens everywhere, from the local motels to the houses next door,” Graves explained. “If it’s 2 a.m. and you see an underage girl walking a street by herself dressed provocatively, if you’re staying at a hotel and see girls in a room by themselves and men coming in and out of there... you need to report those kinds of things.”

To report a possible trafficking case or volunteer, call the SAFE shelter on its 24-hour hotline at

518-374-5178.