

# Taking Care Of Human Trafficking's Victims

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Sometimes, it's the silent patients who are screaming the loudest for help — such as the approximately 21 million people who are victims of human trafficking. Human trafficking takes many forms, but the most familiar are probably forced labor, forced domestic service and sex trafficking.



Back in February, the American Hospital Association's Association for Community Health Improvement in conjunction with Hospitals in Pursuit of Excellence presented a webinar titled, "[Human Trafficking: What the Health Care System Can Do.](#)" While a "must-view webinar" is a popular marketing term, this one deserves your full attention for its hour running time. Consider this statistic quoted in the presentation: Up to half of victims are evaluated in a health care facility while they are being trafficked. In other words, the health care system might be the first ray of light for a trafficking victim who might literally be living in a dark hole.

One of the presenters, Roy Ahn, the associate director of Massachusetts General Hospital's Division of Human Rights, notes during his part of the webinar that human trafficking is a big issue for the health care system because the victims experience myriad health problems, including head trauma, cigarette burns (like our fictional patient), substance abuse and/or psychological disorders. As Ahn says, "Even if a victim of trafficking suffers no physical or sexual abuse, the burden of emotional trauma is heavy."

Ahn's co-presenters were both from Catholic health care systems (Catholic Health Initiatives and Covenant Health). [Catholic Health Initiatives produced a YouTube video](#) that really is a powerful resource for those who want to understand this issue in greater detail (the images of child soldiers — one form of trafficking — are heartbreaking). One thing I learned from the video is human trafficking is (according to some estimates) a \$32 billion industry — money made on the backs of the world's most vulnerable populations.

MC Sullivan, (who at the time of the presentation was Covenant Health's Director of Ethics), says in the webinar that the seeds of Covenant Health's anti-human trafficking initiatives were sown when, over coffee with colleagues, they realized they had all been to lectures about human

trafficking. Then, Sullivan notes, the global problem of human trafficking landed in her backyard:

“Within days — and I mean literally — within days of having heard our respective programs, each of us has personally encountered human trafficking. We were hearing about human trafficking raids in some of our ordinary and wonderful communities outside of Boston. I live in a town that is about 8 miles west of the city center, and we have had three trafficking raids in the last 24 months.”

Those that perpetrate human trafficking count on their victims being invisible to the community at large. By focusing on community health initiatives that help bring attention to this abomination, hospitals truly are enhancing the health of their communities — and unlocking the door to freedom for its victims.

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