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## Via Christi workers help ID human trafficking victims

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03/01/2015 2:30 PM



Laurie Labarca lights a candle at Via Christi St. Francis during a special Mass and prayer service on Feb. 9 for human trafficking victims in the Chapel of the Sorrowful Mother. Behind her is the Rev. Jeremy Huser. The Mass was part of the celebration of the feast day, or remembrance, of St. Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese-born former slave who is the patron saint of human trafficking victims. Mike Hutmacher The Wichita Eagle

Since starting a training program last February to identify human trafficking victims, Via Christi Health medical workers in Wichita have helped seven young women escape a growing problem considered a modern-day form of slavery.

Prosecutors and a national anti-trafficking expert say it makes sense to have a program such as the one developed by Via Christi to intervene and help victims, but only about a handful of hospitals across the nation have developed protocols, or specific procedures, for medical personnel to follow to help identify human trafficking victims.

“The health care sector is an area that will come in contact with a victim and is in a position to help,” said Jeff Barrows, an obstetrician/gynecologist who has been involved with anti-trafficking efforts for the past decade. He cited statistics that indicate 50 to 88 percent of human

trafficking victims will encounter a health care professional, but only about 2 percent of health care professionals are trained to ID the victims.

Victims are often “kept isolated but they do get beat up and hurt, and one of the few things traffickers will let them do is get stitched up,” said Sedgwick County District Attorney Marc Bennett.

Within a month after training more than 125 physicians, nurses and other clinicians on how to recognize a human trafficking victim, Via Christi officials said, it helped identify its first one — a 14-year-old girl who came to the Via Christi Hospital St. Joseph emergency room.

After separating the teen from her abuser and building a rapport with her, clinicians learned the girl had run away from a foster home and had been exploited, being forced to have sex with as many as 22 different men in two weeks. After treatment, she was released to police protective custody.

As part of the human trafficking awareness and victim identification process, trained Via Christi workers look for seven red flags that can identify a victim, including that the patient has someone speaking for them; exhibits fear, anxiety, nervousness and/or avoids eye contact; isn’t aware of what city they are in; or shows sign of abuse and neglect.

If they suspect the person is a victim, the clinicians then proceed through four protocol steps. The final two steps deal with whether the patient wants to notify law enforcement. If the victim is under age 18, Via Christi follows mandatory child abuse reporting statutes.

“If they are over 18, we can’t force them to accept our help,” said Tina Peck, a registered nurse and Via Christi’s forensic nursing program coordinator. Her team cares for victims of sexual abuse.

If the victims want help, the protocol states security is called to help the patient call 911.

For victims who don’t want to notify law enforcement, medical staff make sure the patient knows how to get help by providing telephone numbers to a number of agencies that deal with sexual assault and human trafficking. They also remind the victim they can come back to a Via Christi hospital for help.

Via Christi is requiring all emergency room and labor and delivery charge nurses who have managerial roles to complete the training. The hospital system hopes all employees, including those at Via Christi Clinics, will be trained as well, Peck said.

Barrows, the national anti-trafficking expert and medical doctor, cited three other hospitals nationwide — children’s hospitals in Atlanta and in Louisville, Ky., and Massachusetts General in Boston, which is affiliated with Harvard Medical School — that have developed specific procedures to help identify human trafficking victims in recent years.

“Via Christi is very unusual and they are leading the way by developing specific protocols on how to handle victims of human trafficking,” Barrows said. “We need every hospital doing this.”

U.S. Attorney for Kansas Barry Grissom agreed that hospitals can play an essential role.

“Often the first and only place (victims) can turn to is a hospital ER, and if those doctors and nurses have a protocol to look for victims, they can be a lifesaver,” he said.

Grissom, who recognized Via Christi with a community service award for the program, said other U.S. attorneys are asking about the program after he shared information about it with his 92 counterparts.

Via Christi’s parent organization, Ascension Health, the nation’s largest Catholic and nonprofit health system, is considering implementing Via Christi’s protocols at its hospitals in 23 states and the District of Columbia, according to Via Christi officials.

For Nicole Ensminger, an MRI technician who was instrumental in developing Via Christi’s human trafficking awareness program, the initiative gives her an opportunity to affect the community where she lives and works.

A few years back, Ensminger recalled, she was talking to an acquaintance who told her she was going to Cambodia to help women and children — some of whom were sold by their parents to traffickers — who were in the sex trade.

“That absolutely broke my heart,” said Ensminger, who considered going on a similar trip.

Then her husband showed her a Wichita Eagle article that explained human trafficking was a problem here in Wichita.

“At that point, instead of going to Cambodia, I wanted to focus my efforts here to make a difference locally,” she said.

While taking a master’s level health care leadership course at Friends University, she started doing research and found there really weren’t guidelines or protocols on how health care workers could help combat the problem.

Skip Hidlay, the health organization’s senior administrator for communications and marketing, was in the same class when Ensminger presented her research. He started working with her to help form Via Christi’s human trafficking awareness committee.

Partners in the training and awareness efforts have included Grissom, Bennett, the Wichita Police Department and Via Christi’s forensic nurses, Hidlay said.

Barrows is helping Via Christi to continue its training and enhance the protocols. Via Christi also plans to connect with Wichita State University’s Center for Combating Human Trafficking, Hidlay said.

“This has been a huge wake-up call for our staff,” Hiday said. “Some wonder if they’ve let others slip by in the past.”

Bennett, the DA, said he is helping train Via Christi staff because it raises awareness about the multibillion-dollar human trafficking industry and “this strikes me as rich, fertile ground to find abusers and traffickers.”

As part of his presentation, he talks to the health care workers about becoming “a better historian” of facts by writing down details in case they need to testify. It’s similar to the training he provides for front-line people to identify child abuse, he said.

According to U.S. government sources, human trafficking affects 200 million people worldwide and is a \$32 billion industry.

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