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Digital billboards join the fight against human trafficking

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Clear Channel Outdoor Holdings Inc., together with local, state, and federal law enforcement in central Iowa, recently unveiled an out-of-home media campaign to combat human trafficking. For the next month, 30 Clear Channel Outdoor Americas digital billboards will display educational messages across Iowa's Polk County about human trafficking. The billboards alert victims on how to "get help to get out" of the life through the help of citizens.

"We want to hold human traffickers accountable in Iowa, and we hope this collaborative public awareness effort will help us rescue victims and pursue traffickers on our streets and highways," Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller said. "Human traffickers try to keep a low profile. The more eyes we have to help us identify traffickers and their victims, the better off we are."

As a form of slavery, human trafficking involves the illegal trade of people for exploitation or commercial gain. Traffickers use force, fraud or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. Victims rarely come forward because of language barriers or because they fear traffickers and law enforcement, the announcement said.

In 2014, the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline fielded 24 reports of human trafficking in Iowa, with more than half involving minors. Since 2007, the hotline has received reports of nearly 100 incidents. The International Labor Organization estimates that there are 21 million people worldwide who are victims of forced labor. Of those, ILO estimates that 4.5 million are victims of forced sexual exploitation.

"Human trafficking is found in our own communities regardless of socio-economic status," said Terry Hernandez, executive director of the Chrysalis Foundation, a public foundation supporting girls and women in the greater Des Moines area. "In Iowa, we find foster care children and runaways are particularly vulnerable to the commercial sex industry; for Chrysalis, our concern is for girls in our after-school programs across the metro area. Our goal is to collaborate with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies to prevent victimization, and recover and provide a path for healing for victims of human trafficking. Chrysalis is grateful to be partnering with Clear Channel and Iowa's law enforcement leadership as we work to unmask this epidemic in our society. This partnership is a major step in providing prevention, awareness, advocacy and victim recognition within our communities."

The digital billboard messages inform trafficking victims who may be unaware that resources exist to help them, and urge the public to help identify and report suspicious activity. The ads direct passersby to the NHTRC's 24-hour, multilingual and confidential hotline for victims and community members.

According to FBI Omaha Field Office Acting Special Agent Thomas Metz, "The FBI, in conjunction with its state and local law enforcement partners will continue to work hard to combat human trafficking. It is a destructive crime impacting not only its victims but society as a whole. Detecting human trafficking is essential to stopping it and an awareness initiative like the one commencing today will work toward uncovering this grievous crime."

CCOA launched its first anti-human trafficking campaign in Philadelphia in 2012 and has since supported campaigns in Baltimore, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, Milwaukee, New Jersey, New York, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle, and across the entire state of Texas and Indiana. This is CCOA's 17th anti-human-trafficking campaign. The data shows that these campaigns drive calls to the hotline, including tips and requests by victims for help.

"We are proud to be part of such an important campaign to raise awareness of human trafficking in Des Moines and beyond. Billboards and other outdoor media are a powerful way to reach people while also targeting specific audiences, and Clear Channel has a long history of working with law enforcement, government agencies and nonprofits on myriad public safety and community building initiatives," Tim Jameson, president, CCOA-Des Moines, said. "Modern slavery is a pervasive scourge that affects all of us in all of our communities. Knowing there is help and a safe place to go is an important first step in surviving slavery, so we all hope this Polk County campaign will be a strong and visible step forward in the fight against this important problem.

The outdoor media campaign is a joint effort involving CCOA-Des Moines, the Office of the Attorney General of Iowa, the United States Attorney's Office-Southern District of Iowa, Des Moines Police Department, Polk County Sheriff's Office, Iowa State Patrol and the FBI.