

http://www.newjerseyhills.com/observer-tribune/opinion/columns/commentary-human-trafficking-new-jersey-s-unseen-prisons-a-tragic/article_0e875e99-c10c-51bf-9693-dd51b47e7518.html

COMMENTARY: Human trafficking: New Jersey's 'unseen prisons' a tragic situation



By **RODNEY FRELINGHUYSEN**

The writer, a resident of Harding Township, is a Republican congressman representing the 11th district, which includes parts of the Somerset Hills, Morris County and the West Essex area of Essex County. He can be reached at (973) 984-0711.

Posted: Friday, February 13, 2015 3:00 am

When you think of human trafficking, you don't think of New Jersey.

Rather, you think of the U.S. southern border or women being imprisoned and carried in shipping containers into ports on the East Coast.

However, New Jersey has "unseen prisons" throughout the state.

Though few of our neighbors are aware, hundreds of women and children are trafficked despite the best efforts of law enforcement, advocacy groups and local, state and federal agencies.

Human trafficking is a growing criminal industry, second only to drug dealing. Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation, physical violence or forced labor.

According to the FBI, sex trafficking is the fastest-growing business of organized crime and the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world. How is sex trafficking different from prostitution? The trafficked person is not free to leave.

Last year's Super Bowl at the Meadowlands was a wake-up call for many as police and other experts warned that criminals would use the large crowds associated with that event to sell adults and children into prostitution.

Their hope was that they would find willing clients among the people attending parties or the game itself.

Across the United States, more than 17,000 people are trafficked into the United States every year, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Some are forced into low-wage or unpaid work. Others are exploited for sex or sold into prostitution rings. According to a University of Pennsylvania study, quoted by the FBI, another 300,000 American children are at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking every year. Tragically, most of the victims of this crime are vulnerable youth who have run away from home, are part of a child welfare system, and/or have been previous victims of abuse and assault.

Trafficking Hub

Unfortunately, New Jersey has been described as a “hub” for human trafficking. Why? Our state is easily accessible via our interstate highways. Major tourist destinations like Atlantic City and New York City makes us more vulnerable and susceptible. And since traffickers often prey on victims of their own background, New Jersey’s great ethnic diversity makes it harder for law enforcement to observe and prosecute these activities.

This is a shocking nationwide crisis.

“Modern-day slavery exists right here in the United States,” said my colleague Congresswoman Ann Wagner, R- Missouri. “Through the scourge of human trafficking, children in our own neighborhoods and communities are sold into forced prostitution every single day.

Sexual predators can browse advertisements and have child prostitutes sent to their hotel rooms as easily as if they were ordering a pizza.”

This week, the House passed a dozen bipartisan bills designed to protect children and combat this growing problem – providing support and services to the victims of this crime and boosting resources for law enforcement.

I am a cosponsor of many of these bills which are intended to build on the bipartisan laws passed last year to reduce child sex trafficking and increase adoptions of foster care youth.

But at its root, combating this scourge takes the increased awareness of every citizen.

Speaking up is the most effective way to protect and support the victims and their families.

Is someone you know being trafficked? Is human trafficking happening in your community?

Knowing the red flags and indicators of human trafficking is a key step in identifying more victims and helping them find the assistance they need.

The New Jersey Human Trafficking Task Force operates a hotline to report human trafficking -1- 855-END-NJ-HT (1-855-363-6548).

The hotline is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by detectives in the Human Trafficking Unit within the Division of Criminal Justice.

In addition, there are over a hundred member organizations that comprise the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking. For a comprehensive list of these groups, visit their website.

Awareness is a key to closing down New Jersey's "unseen prisons!"