

# Human trafficking afar and at home

*Hotels and Airbnb rentals now centers for trafficking*

BY BRITTANY KING

Human trafficking. We hear the term used but do we really know exactly what it means and — more importantly — do we know what's at stake? The very idea of people being trafficked for sex seems like the kind of business handled in far away places with few laws and no control. So would you believe it if it happened in your own backyard? Would you even recognize it? Because it is happening. Human trafficking is increasingly becoming more of an issue right here on the North Side of Chicago.

Is that Airbnb rental down the block being turned into a makeshift brothel?

Let's go back to basics and define the phrase itself, human trafficking is: the action or practice of illegally transporting people from one country or area to another, typically for the purposes of forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation.

Upwards of 300,000 kids nationally are at risk of being traf-

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**TRAFFICKING** *see p. 4*

## TRAFFICKING from p. 1

ficked. This includes runaways, kids kicked out of their homes, children being pimped by parents or guardians who are drug users, and children who disappear from foster care programs. It's a \$32 billion dollar a year venture globally.

Kidnapping, coercion, absolute desperation for money – whatever the reason, the fact of the matter is that human trafficking remains an issue nationally. More specifically, it has increasingly become a problem right here in Chicago.

To see how big of a problem it is locally, understand that 15,000 to 24,000 of those 300,000 kids are victims of trafficking in the greater Chicago area; however, State Senator Karen McConnaughay [33rd] told Chicago Magazine, “There are studies that estimate as many as 25,000 victims of commercial exploitation exist in Illinois. The reality of human slavery is happening in our own backyard.”

This means that over 8% of all human trafficking victims in the country are right here in Chicago.

Most of them are under the age

of 18 and victims of sex trafficking, according to Frank Massolini who is the head of Salvation Army's Chicago-area Promise program — an organization that assists victims. Statistics from the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) report that Illinois has the fifth highest call volume only behind New York, Florida, Texas, and California.

But why Chicago? Amy Alvarado of the Cook County Attorney's Office believes it's because Chicago is a big “convention city” with close proximity to a significant international airport. O'Hare plays an important role in human trafficking in Chicago and the location makes it easy to transport victims to other places, not to mention Chicago has the highest volume of immigrants in the Midwest. Both of these factors really help make Chicago a prime location for trafficking compared to other Midwestern cities that may not have as high a volume of visitors or as big of an airport.

But the danger of being trafficked is not just left to tourists and immigrants. The Univ. of Illinois

at Chicago states that hundreds of girls and young women are held captive as sex slaves in the city. These girls can come from any background and any area, but can still fall victim to the industry. It's not so hard for residents of Cook County to become victims of sex

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trafficking outside of their own homes. Sadly most victims know their traffickers, who often lure girls as “boyfriends” with promises of love or protection. Often, girls who are being trafficked are reluctant to approach authorities, due to fear or mistrust or even poor English skills. As for illegal immigrants and the undocumented, that status is many times used against them through threats to turn them over to immigration control officers.

The sad truth is that pretty much anyone can become a victim of human trafficking because these operations aren't strictly run out of homes in troubled areas, as some may think. For instance, reports of trafficking in the South Side are not the only ones coming out from the Chicago area. Just last Fall a

woman was charged for running a sex trafficking scheme in Mt. Prospect, and in 2015 a man received an eight-year sentence for running a sex trafficking ring on the West Side. Here on the North Side, this newspaper has reported on rings run on the Gold Coast, in River North, Lakeview, Uptown, Lincoln Bend and Edgewater.

The problem is that sometimes these schemes happen where you least expect it. And traffickers are now changing tactics, using rental properties and, now, Airbnb.

In fact, one woman who spoke anonymously with the New York Post, explained that Airbnb was cheaper and more discreet than fancy hotels. Her escort service had the system down pat: They rented out apartments in Manhattan's stodgiest neighborhoods for up to a week at a time, evading scrutiny by supplying employees with prepaid debit cards and having them book rooms through personal Airbnb profiles.

Hotels and motels pose a huge threat, as they are one of the many places that traffickers use for their victims. It's a convenient venue for traffickers since there is so much commotion in hotels and hotel staff generally does not know of all the signs to look for, not to mention the stays are brief and people can be in and out quite easily. Aside from these being places for traffickers to go to exploit victims, there have also been many recorded incidents of people within the hotel industry being involved in human trafficking rings. Again, when staff and management don't know the signs and what to look for, it makes the process that much easier for traffickers.

Hotels are clearly an easily ac-

cessible venue, but with the rise of services like Airbnb, trafficking in third party locations becomes even more convenient than before. According to the Polaris Project, nearly 1,500 cases of human trafficking in hotels and motels were reported between 2007 and 2015.

The statistics are high and they speak a frightening truth about the reality of local trafficking. So what's being done to help? Last year Gov. Bruce Rauner, with chief sponsorship from Sen. McConnaughay, added another human trafficking task force to address the ever-growing issue of trafficking across the state of Illinois. And for a bill that was just introduced in Aug., 2016, the task force won't last long. The lack of longevity of this task force will actually be beneficial because the group must present results to lawmakers by July 1 of this year.

This task force will be looking for new ways the state can fight human trafficking, as well as begin to critique the actual effectiveness of current laws. Arguably one of the best outcomes of this task force will be the evaluation of the need to treat victims of human trafficking as crime victims, not criminals. Hopefully the task force can also develop some new ways to promote the safety and ultimately, the rights, of these victims.

Human trafficking is not out of sight and out of mind, especially for Chicago. Keep in mind that January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month, which is extremely important because the first step to helping victims of trafficking is by being educated on the topic. You can call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at any time at 1-888-373-7888.

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