

January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month: An Issue that Affects Every Community

As we embark on another new year, it is important to bring attention to an issue that affects vulnerable adults and youth in every community: human trafficking. Human trafficking is defined by the U.S. Government as: Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age and/or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the person of subjection to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, or slavery (National Institute of Justice).

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a form of human trafficking and child sexual abuse and is a specific focus of the work of Tompkins County's CSEC Critical Team. The Critical Team, led by Tompkins County Youth Services and the Advocacy Center, convenes local partners that work directly with youth that may be especially vulnerable to CSEC to increase community awareness of this issue and to implement appropriate response protocols to victims of CSEC and youth at high risk. The work of the Critical Team is funded through the Safe Harbour program of New York State's Office of Children and Family Services.

There are common myths and misconceptions regarding human trafficking that are important to dispel:

- Trafficking **does not require** that a victim be transported from one location to another, in fact a youth could be sex trafficked and not leave their home.
- Trafficking occurs **in every community** in the United States, it is not just an issue that affects foreign-born individuals who are brought to this country. Most victims of CSEC in our community are U.S. citizens.
- Victims of trafficking can come from **all socioeconomic backgrounds**.

Exploiters can be anyone including friends, family members, trusted adults, or someone who is claiming to have a romantic relationship with the youth. They target vulnerable youth, using psychological and physical manipulation.

Below are some signs that a young person might be a victim or at high risk of CSEC:

- Chronic runaway/homeless youth (nationally, 1 in 5 homeless youth report being a victim)
- Injuries/signs of physical abuse
- Presence of another person, often older, who seems controlling
- Not in control of their own money
- Having material possessions they normally wouldn't (cash, expensive clothing, new cell phone)

If you suspect that a youth you have encountered is in an emergency situation, where the safety and welfare of the youth is in imminent jeopardy, contact 9-1-1 and report the situation.

For more information, or to seek assistance and support, please visit www.listenforthesigns.org or contact the Advocacy Center's 24/7 confidential hotline at: (607) 277-5000.

Free community trainings on this topic are available and can be requested via www.listenforthesigns.org.

Monthly Messages are brought to you by the Tompkins County Youth Services Department, a proud partner of the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth. If you have further questions or comments about this message or would like information on how to become involved with the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, please email kshanks@tompkins-co.org.

