

Caledon councillor's video about sex trafficking goes viral on social media

A video is circulating across social media raising awareness about human sex trafficking in Peel Region.

Ward 2 Regional Coun. Johanna Downey sits on the Peel Human Trafficking Service Providers Committee. She released an emotional recording on her Facebook page stating 'the average age of entry into commercial child sexual exploitation is 13-years-old.' Downey has two daughters, one who turned 12-years-old. She used the hashtags [emmys13thyear](#) and [#imnotforsale](#)

'We're always challenged with exposure and awareness, said Downey in an interview with the Citizen. I've been at the table for two years and doing a lot of thinking about it over the last few months and with some of the things we're working through and working on, I felt that it was good timing.'

'I was able to connect it personally with me, with my daughter and I think sometimes people forget. It's easy to look at large problems and think they're not happening within my bubble, but the reality is, we all have daughters, sisters, mothers, nieces; and I shouldn't narrow it down to just girls because it crosses gender. This happens to boys as well, it's just less reported. In the video, she said it's a difficult conversation to have and that human sex trafficking is easy to avoid. For her daughter's 13th year, Downey plans to provide updates regularly 'because it's a hard conversation that we need to have. Our community needs to have it. We need to educate ourselves and educate each other and in turn educate our kids.'

'I think having the opportunity to share my thoughts and why it's important to me, linking it with my own family and some people relate it to their own lives, said Downey. In turn it raises awareness. When you relate things to your own life, it's not easy to brush them aside. It's not as easy to ignore the big issue when they become personal.'

The video has 24,000 views on Facebook as of Monday afternoon. The councillor also received support from a number of dignitaries and community groups such as the Ontario Network of Victim Service Providers, Elizabeth Fry Peel Halton, Neighbourhood Watch Brampton and Brampton Focus among many others.

'I was happy to have the support of all of my colleagues as well, said Downey. All of my council colleagues we're sharing it, the three Peel mayors shared it. They have a huge network and I've been getting calls and messages and emails from people in the support service industry, parents that are just saying 'thank you for bringing this up, thank you for opening our eyes, what can we do to help, different service organizations that want to be involved with the service provider table but didn't really realize that it was happening. I think it has been fantastic that, that level of awareness can bring people together.'

Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown shared it on both his personal and professional pages. 'My good friend Johanna Downey, Ward 2 Caledon Regional Councillor, wants to raise awareness on human sex trafficking in our community and our province, Brown wrote on Facebook. The numbers are staggering. Please watch. Please share this message. Help expose this horror.'

Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson also shared it on Facebook to his professional page. 'Councillor Johanna Downey is a champion for her Ward 2 residents but she is also a strong advocate in the fight against human trafficking, Thompson wrote on Facebook. This video highlights facts that can't be ignored. Human trafficking is an issue in our community. We need to educate ourselves and protect our youth. This isn't an easy conversation but it is one that needs to happen. I applaud my colleague and challenge all of us to become more aware and ensure our community is safe.'

Downey admits that this topic is outside of her comfort level but she filmed the video with her daughter, who edited and produced the video.

'It was a good opportunity for us to work on it together and to be able to have the conversation, said Downey. It's very heavy content, very serious and explicit content and to be able to build it with her and talk about the stats and talk about the reality, it was a good opportunity for me as well as a parent to have that conversation with my daughter.'

?At the end of the day, if our kids don't know, and they don't know what's out there, how would they know to recognize it if they're being approached or if they're having people reach out to them online through their Instagram or other means, like Snapchat. If they don't recognize it, they can't red flag it. It's so important to have that conversation with them to let them know. Even if my daughter says that never happened to her, what if it's happening to one of her friends, or her cousins? Being aware is the key.?

The Region of Peel Council endorsed a strategy to address human sex trafficking in the area.

In a unanimous decision passed by Council on June 14, 2018, Peel Region will implement a three-year pilot program to offer a coordinated approach with a core group of agencies for human sex trafficking prevention and survivor support, according to their website. ?The most current data shows that Peel Regional Police conducted over half of the human trafficking investigations in Canada, and 62.5% of Canadian cases originate in the GTA, said Janice Sheehy, commissioner of human services of Peel Region in a news release. Recent studies indicate that the average age of entry into commercial child sexual exploitation is 13 and a half years old and the average age of victims entrenched in sex trafficking is 17 years old. Survivors require safe, supportive housing and services that are geared to their unique needs while offering them protection and restoring their dignity.

The framework consists of prevention, intervention and exits and housing. The Region of Peel will work collaboratively with Peel Regional Police, school boards, Peel Children's Aid Society and Peel service providers to ensure all target populations have equal access to prevention and education programming across the Region, according to the news release.

A services hub will be put in place for individuals at-risk, engaged in and transitioning out of sex trafficking. The hub will offer system navigation, case management, trauma counselling and outreach. It will also host community partners that will provide complementary services, such as basic health care, addictions support, legal aid, education, life skills, employment supports within the hub.

A safe and emergency house will provide immediate, secure housing for four to six females and female-identifying individuals exiting human sex trafficking for 72 hours up to four months. A transitional house will offer a secure, supportive housing option for four months to two years for up to six female and female-identifying survivors who are starting to rebuild their lives.

?I hope people really are touched and I hope it is present in their minds, said Downey. It's easy to go about our day to day, go to work, manage our families through our everyday stuff and not really think about some of the larger issues. We push them in a place and think ?that happens in the city, it's not happening in my neighbourhood but the reality is, all of these things are happening in our neighbourhood and we need to be aware.?

?A lot of people may say, ?my kid is never going to do drugs, my kid is never going to get wrapped up in something like that, but the reality is, if we're not having a conversation with our kids and they don't know what to be aware of, they won't understand or won't know when to red flag an issue.