

Human trafficking continues to be a major issue in Peel

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

Human trafficking is on the constant rise and is a growing problem within Canada, but especially here in Peel Region.

Recent studies, conducted by Family Services of Peel, show that rates of human trafficking are alarmingly higher in Peel Region than the rest of the country.

Human trafficking is a \$150 billion industry with nearly 21 million victims across the world. People think it's something that happens in other faraway parts of the world, but our research has found that it's occurring right here in our own backyard," said Sandra Rupnarian, director of Client Services for Family Services of Peel. "Our findings show the Region of Peel, in fact, has become a particularly hot spots for the illegal activity."

A whopping 62 per cent of police-reported human trafficking cases in Canada are found in Peel Region. According to the data collected by the Peel Institute of Violence Prevention, human trafficking is found to be significantly higher at 1.14 person out of 100,000 population in 2016 in comparison to the 1.0 in Ontario and 0.79 in Toronto.

The rates of human trafficking are increasing and it is integral that we do as much as we can to help unravel the pull of the human trafficking industry," says Rupnarian. "We need to raise awareness of the issue amongst the public and draw more attention to the fact it is a crime and dehumanizing to its victims."

According to recent research, 90 per cent of victims of human trafficking are female, with 42 per cent first trafficked before hitting the age of 18. The most vulnerable victims are those of Indigenous girls, with data concluding 51 per cent of trafficking women are Indigenous.

Awareness groups and movements are continuously working at bringing this issue to the fore in communities around Peel. With the issue, seemingly, only getting worse, the provincial government is now getting involved.

On Nov. 28 of last year Doug Ford alongside Dufferin-Caledon MPP and Solicitor General Sylvia Jones and Jill Dunlop, Associate Minister of Children and Women Issues, presented the development of a new Ontario commitment to protect and fight against human trafficking.

Ontario has more police-reported incidents of human trafficking than any other province in Canada," said Solicitor General Jones in an interview in late November. "Ensuring the safety and security of Ontarians is the government's most fundamental responsibility, which is why we are committed to providing ongoing funding to stop the criminals who are profiting from this crime, so we can protect our children and keep our communities safe."

The Ontario Government is committed to funding services and support for victims of human trafficking, with an annual cost of \$20 million. The funding is split into three categories: Prevention and Specialized Services for Victims of Human Trafficking totalling \$12.3 million, Law Enforcement Initiatives totalling \$2.9 million and Victim Services and Justice Sector Supports with a total of \$4.8 million.

Dorothy Davis, Executive Director alongside Pina Marino, Program Manager from Caledon-Dufferin Victim services explain the vitality of front-line training for police services, hospital staff and other organizations that may intersect with human traffickers such as hotels, bars and restaurants to protect those from human traffickers.

Because the physical and psychological consequences of trafficking are so great, enhanced training for front line personnel is recommended. Victims of human trafficking have often been exposed to violence, threats, sexual assault and drug use as methods of

control by traffickers. The trauma may change the way a victim understands and views themselves and the world around them. They often lose their sense of safety, feel vulnerable and alone with no one to trust, they said. Sometimes, people involved in human trafficking do not see themselves as victims because of the complex relationships that may form with their traffickers or because their traffickers are often posing as boyfriends.

Protecting, educating and raising awareness is extremely important to provide within the communities, but as well as providing those services and support to victims.

Caledon-Dufferin Victim Services receives funding through the Ministry of the Attorney General Victims and Vulnerable Persons as a part of the government's Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy.

The assistance is offered to both direct victims as well as their families. No police involvement is required to access the funds however, victims and survivors must contact a victim services agency to have access, explained Marino. As for local needs, besides the obvious practical needs such as housing, residential and day programs and dedicated emotional supports; continuing education for front line staff and the community as a whole is needed.

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) have organized a victim-focused and multi-sector collaborative team to combat and reduce human trafficking throughout the province.

As the part of the Provincial Strategy to End Human Trafficking, the OPP has formed the Anti-Human Trafficking Investigations Coordination Team. This team supports police efforts throughout the province through collaboration, information sharing, coordination related to investigations, as well as community mobilization efforts with the ultimate goal of reducing victimization. The Team also offers training and presentations, education and awareness campaigns in the communities, said Community Services Officer, Iryna Nebogatova. The OPP is committed to fighting human trafficking through intelligence-gathering and working cooperatively with our partners to support victims and enforcement efforts.

She added, In October of 2019, Caledon OPP and Caledon/Dufferin Victim Services (CDVS) reached out to the local hotels and inns, and were welcomed to deliver Human Trafficking Awareness Training to the hospitality staff at Hampton Inn in Bolton.

Peel Region is developing a strategy that will provide services from approximately 40 human service agencies to provide support and care for victims and survivors of human trafficking.

For more information about human trafficking within Peel Region please visit peel.police.ca under Safety Tips or learn more about victim support programs at cdvs.ca.