

Human trafficking continues to be prevalent in Caledon community

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

Human trafficking has consistently been an issue not only in the nation's biggest cities, but also in semi-rural regions like Caledon and Dufferin County.

The thought of vulnerable girls being lured into the arms of predators, and pimps is sickening to the mind of most people, yet the reality is that it happens all too often here in our own backyard.

The average age of human trafficking victims is 13-years-old, with most of the victims known to come from homes of child abuse, homelessness or foster care. However, even the most stable of youth, with a comfortable background, can find themselves dragged into the disgusting underworld of human trafficking. Caledon Dufferin Victim Services (CDVS) tells the Citizen this is an issue that doesn't discriminate, with predators always on the lookout for young girls, regardless of where they come from.

CDVS has been helping, and supporting human trafficking victims since 2016, while constantly raising awareness on a growing issue in the Caledon and Dufferin community.

Human Trafficking is considered a form of slavery that has existed throughout history. There is no reason to believe that our communities have been exempt from this dehumanizing crime, explained Executive Director Dorothy Davis and Programs Manager at CDVS Pina Marino. However, due to the increased awareness of the issue in recent times, many service providers believe that what they had previously classified as intimate partner violence, sexual violence or runaway teens, may have, in fact been cases of human trafficking.

World Day Against Human Trafficking took place last Thursday (July 30). The annual event is held to raise awareness about human trafficking around the world.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the theme for this year's event was to honour the first responders who work on the frontlines to end human trafficking.

Over the past several months, those working on the frontlines have faced unprecedented challenges responding to the ongoing threat of human trafficking and providing continued supports to victims during the COVID-19 outbreak. We deeply appreciate their unwavering dedication, said Dufferin-Caledon MPP, and Ontario's Solicitor General Sylvia Jones. As we mark this important day, our government is proud to recognize the many service providers, community partners and police forces across Ontario doing critical work to prevent this crime, help survivors, and bring traffickers to justice.

CDVS describes the day to be an awareness event that often brings change, stating The more we know about it, talk about it, recognize it-the closer we will get to decreasing the incidents. Initiatives such as World Against Human Trafficking Day increases awareness of the issue and hopefully gets people interested and motivated to learn more about HT and help.

Ontario, alongside Nova Scotia, are the two provinces with the highest rates of human trafficking in the country, according to Statistics Canada.

Ontario has accounted for roughly 68 per cent of all police-reported human trafficking reports since 2009, until 2018. There was a total of just under 1,400 human trafficking victims in Canada between 2009 to 2018.

Between 2018 and 2019, CDVS has helped 14 adult girls, one adult man and seven youths directly with its programming, while offering varying levels of assistance to a further 11 adult girls, four adult men and one youth in the area. The organization has also helped three female witnesses to come forward and share their stories around human trafficking.

'Traffickers target vulnerable people and vulnerable people are found everywhere. Our areas may have been considered 'untapped markets' by traffickers who have found the bigger cities more competitive,' said Davis. 'Smaller towns are particularly attractive to traffickers because removing young boys and girls from their small towns provides instant isolation, which is one of the main ingredients of exploitation.'

But how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the ongoing issue?

'The consensus seems to be that the most vulnerable remain at the highest risk when employment is precarious and financial security unsure, along with closing of shelters and public spaces. Certainly, all agree that technology is playing a huge role in recruiting and distributing sexual services and grooming individuals for sexual exploitation,' said Marino. 'At CDVS, we have not seen an increase in human trafficking numbers, but it is a very under reported crime.'

Davis and Marino described the factor that impacts them the most when supporting human trafficking victims.

'All the cases I have supported have been women between the ages of 14 and 33 and they have all impacted me in many ways. It is a complicated, devastating experience for families of the victims who struggle to understand the hold that traffickers have over their daughters,' they said. 'Sadly, many women return to their pimp over and over again, even after intensive treatment. The saddest cases are from victims without family or safe supports who come to believe that being sold for sex has become their life.'

They added, 'Visit our website; call our 24-hour crisis line; CDVS will present to your group. Articles such as these are very helpful to raise awareness. Many great online resources exist that shed light on the issue and provide information about the prevalence and what is being done.'

For more information, please visit cdvs.ca.