

New strategy in the works to fight human trafficking in Ontario

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

The Ontario government has announced the development of a new strategy to fight and overcome human trafficking in Ontario.

Last Thursday (Nov. 28), Premier Doug Ford expressed his anger and frustration at the increased presence of human trafficking across the province, declaring his dedication to combat the issue.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP, and Solicitor General Sylvia Jones and Jill Dunlop, Associate Minister of Children and Women Issues will be co-leading the development, which is a part of Ontario's commitment to protecting women and children as well as combatting gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse.

"Every day across Ontario, young women and children are being lured into human trafficking by criminals who rob them of their safety and dignity," stated Premier Ford. "I want to thank Solicitor General Jones and Associate Minister Dunlop for leading the development and implantation of our new, stronger, cross-government strategy to raise awareness of these disgusting crimes, ensure survivors get the supports they need, and bring their traffickers to justice."

Ontario is committing \$20 million annually to the initiative, to ensure proper support and funding for victims of human trafficking and for different initiatives.

"We are taking action to respond to what we heard. This annual investment for dedicated anti-human trafficking initiatives will ensure victim supports are available on an on-going basis, and that critical prevention and enforcement actions continue," said Associate Minister Dunlop.

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.

According to Statistics Canada, from 2009 to 2016, police recorded data showed a total of 865 victims of human trafficking; 95 percent of victims were women.

Over 70 percent of human trafficking victims identified by the police are under the age of 25, averaging the age of recruitment into sex trafficking at 13 years old.

"Ontario has more police-reported incidents of human trafficking than any other province in Canada," said Solicitor General Jones. "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."

Solicitor General Jones has been studying and gathering information on sexual violence and human trafficking in Ontario for years, and is working towards bringing each Ministry as appropriate with the government wide strategy.

"An example would be as we updated the Health and Social policy curriculum in the Ministry of Education, we made sure that human trafficking awareness was in there. We really need to put human trafficking awareness piece on what to look for, what to steer clear of, kind of awareness, in the curriculum," says Solicitor General Jones.

This past summer, human trafficking survivors, Indigenous partners and law enforcement got together for 13 different meetings to work together on building this strategy that will help victims of human trafficking, raise awareness on the issue, to ensure proper

punishment for offenders and most importantly, to keep children and youth safe from these crimes.

?I want Ontario to stop being a haven for human traffickers. I want people to understand that if you think you can do this and get away with it in the Province of Ontario, you're in for a rude awakening,? Jones said.