



An Update on Human Sex Trafficking

History

– Reed K. Bilz, LWVTC member

The Tarrant County League (LWVTC) has shown an interest in the issue of human sex trafficking since the problem became apparent in Arlington during the Super Bowl XLV in 2010. We held one of our first Hot Topic Lunches on the subject with then Fort Worth Police Chief Thomas Windham as our speaker. LWV-TX selected the topic to study in 2013 and adopted the following position:

The League of Women Voters of Texas is opposed to all forms of domestic and international human trafficking of adults and children, including sex trafficking and labor trafficking. We consider human trafficking to be a form of modern-day slavery and support measures to prevent the use of force, fraud or coercion to exploit a person for sexual or labor purposes.

The extended position supported such strategies as required training for law enforcement personnel and treatment for victims of human trafficking. Some bills passed in the 2015 Legislative Session that mandated training and treatment as advocated by the League. However, the mandates were unfunded, and therefore were rarely or never, implemented.

LWVTC again reviewed the situation in Tarrant County at a general meeting in 2016 with the new Fort Worth Police Chief Joel Fitzgerald and an investigator from Homeland Security. The speakers admitted that there was limited training or treatment in the County, and what treatment that was provided was only offered to minors. Adult women were arrested and charged with prostitution because “they chose to engage in criminal activity.”

What is the current situation in Tarrant County?

By Wanda Foster, Executive Director
Human Action

Human Action is a new 501(c)3 public charity fundraising for Tarrant County human trafficking victims www.human-action.org

The bulk of human trafficking in Tarrant County is sex trafficking involving underage U.S. teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17. As for adults in the sex trade, the human trafficking unit of the Fort Worth Police Department continues to arrest adult prostitutes and jail them because by that time many have committed their own crimes and even reoffended. That is not to say pimps do not get arrested. They do when they are caught, but catching them is not as easy as catching a prostitute, who often is recruited online, leaving a path to the victim of the crime, but not the perpetrator.

In October 2017, eight male human traffickers in Fort Worth were arrested in a sting. Fox4 News said the men sold five juveniles and two adult women for commercial sex at \$100 for a half hour. They were recruited through Facebook and Instagram. One victim told police she was regularly beaten if she made her pimp angry or failed to follow his directions.

Many questions remain regarding the best way to deal with the human trafficking problem. As part of a new human trafficking 501(c) 3 public charity, Human Action, I see change happening for the better certainly in the Fort Worth Police Department in that it seems better staffed than in the past, and it offers community liaison through the Tarrant County 5-Stones Human Trafficking Task Force, which primarily helps child victims—very important work essential to end the cycle for the future. The Fort Worth Police Department has two detectives and two officers, and Tarrant County also recently added human trafficking staff. In March 2017, Sheriff Bill Waybourn formed a new Intelligence Unit in the Tarrant County Sheriff's Office. The unit has a supervisor and three investigators primarily charged with investigating human trafficking cases countywide.

My goal as executive director of Human Action, www.human-action.org, is to raise enough funds to help stem the tide of human suffering among all trafficked people regardless of ethnicity, age, or gender and regardless of the type of trafficking involved. Otherwise, this seemingly intractable problem will continue to victimize people, especially women and children at an inordinate rate. The problem has been allowed to continue for centuries, and only now are changes really being made in how we deal with it.

Among my questions is how many of the adult victims who are jailed were brought in by a pimp at the ages of 14 – 17, manipulated, given drugs to addict and control them, beaten, imprisoned, or coerced into the trade? At what point does the trafficked person stop becoming a trafficked person and become a criminal? If trafficked people are drug addicted or beaten, and police admit most pimps are violent, then perhaps they would do most anything to avoid violent injury or other harm over years of abuse. Eventually many, even most, victims protect their captors as part of an impaired psychological state known as Stockholm Syndrome. The pimp's control and abuse at that point have become normalized because the pimp is the only support system the victim knows. To add to the problem, the victim may depend entirely on the violent pimp for shelter, food, clothing, and any substances they have been induced to abuse. All of these situations make it clear how breaking away from a pimp can be overwhelming and frightening for a human trafficking victim.

So whether the person is an adult or a child, if they started in the trade through coercion, force, or manipulation, Human Action's management believes they deserve a chance to leave the trade, as long as they are motivated to leave the trade, undergo drug treatment if needed, and reintegrate into society. Today, the only chance many get is to leave jail with nothing—no shelter, food, clothing, or transportation, in which case many are referred to a public shelter for housing, which creates fear for a trafficked person and re-exposes them to some of the same types of elements they are trying to flee.

They need drug treatment, temporary lodging in an area where they can be autonomous and regain their independence. Effective drug treatment often requires a 30-day in-house stay, followed by having temporary lodging, food, clothing, emergency medical care if necessary, and accessibility to mass transit or help with transportation while they find a job and learn to reestablish themselves in society. We do have many valuable drug treatment assistance programs, particularly those offered by Tarrant County's My Health My Resources (MHMR) system, and Human Action plans to work with those agencies to help stretch every dollar as far as possible. We will assess each applicant for services and work with others across the community to determine how best to serve victims' needs to restore their lives.

Nevertheless, the lack of temporary lodging, food, clothing, and transportation assistance immediately after a period of incarceration or after arrest and release is a handicap to the Fort Worth human trafficking situation and that of other police units around the country. In fact, a recent U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report has highlighted lack of these resources as a key missing piece necessary to end or reduce the prevalence of human trafficking, particularly sex trade.

Many improvements are being made regarding prosecution and treatment of victims in Tarrant County. Fort Worth human trafficking units undergo training, including internally provided and nonprofit-provided training. As of this writing the human trafficking program director has not stated whether any county, state, or federal government training is offered, although I know the State of Texas has prepared training videos, whether they are for public consumption or for police.

When police were asked if victims are given the opportunity to self-identify their victim status, a Fort Worth Human Trafficking officer, whose name must be withheld for security reasons, said “most officers do that in their own way.” They are expected to understand the signs, but the person is likely to go to jail if they have committed additional crimes. Many are repeat offenders. Some of the signs of trafficked people are things like excess security surrounding the person’s work, i.e., they are not free to move about on their own, and they may show signs of poor physical and mental health and fearfulness. A pimp may transport the person everywhere and monitor them constantly. Other signs are available at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/human-trafficking/recognizing-signs>, along with the National Human Trafficking Resource Center tip hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

Tarrant County underage victims tend to come from runaway situations involving either troubled homes or the foster care system, which has become a revolving door to the sex trade for some underage teens. The officer said many of the youth take drugs. In fact provision of drugs may be part of the pimp’s grooming process for making the victim dependent. When I asked what is needed to keep underage people in a safe environment, the officer said most are sent back to their parents, which can be a good solution or a bad solution. In some cases, the officer added that the families lack resources to provide a good home situation, so providing additional food and clothing or helping with lodging could actually help the child more than removing them to Child Protective Services (CPS), although foster care is the only option for many trafficked children and teens.

Change is likely to come only when unfilled basic needs are made available to help the trafficked make a real transition away from abuse and toward a productive, independent life.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are law enforcement personnel receiving adequate training in recognizing and dealing with victims of human sex trafficking?
2. Are all victims of human sex trafficking, minors and adults, receiving adequate treatment and services to help them recover from their victimization?
3. If the answer is “No” to question 1 or 2, what needs to be done to improve the situation in Tarrant County?
4. If the answer is “No” to question 1 or 2, what should LWVTC do to improve the situation?
 - a. Nothing
 - b. Ask LWV-TX to re-study the issue and provide an update on our position?
 - c. Take local action such as address City Councils, write op-ed pieces, hold informational forums, etc.?