

Programs Teach Kids of Trafficking Dangers

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The sex trafficking issue in Humboldt County might not be obvious, but it's there. And it's a problem.

"I think it's extremely important," Humboldt County 1st District Supervisor Rex Bohn. "It's something you don't think about in your everyday life. When you go on advertising pages like Backpage, it's a solicitation site where they will ply these young women, that's where I saw that it was taking place in our very own county."

Bohn also serves as vice chairman of the Rural County Representatives of California, a group that is funding a collaborative project to educate school-age children on the threat of trafficking.

"We're trying to educate kids on how these predatory perpetrators try to get you," Bohn said.

The program, called PROTECT (Prevention Organized to Educate Children on Trafficking), is a collaborative effort of law enforcement, government agencies, educational agencies and nonprofits focused on anti-trafficking efforts. It is set to launch in Humboldt County schools in the 2017-18 school year, specifically targeting children in fifth, seventh, ninth and 11th grades.

Humboldt County is one of 35 rural counties that will implement the program.

"Human trafficking is a global issue that preys on our most vulnerable populations, including children across California," State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson said in a statement. "PROTECT brings awareness about human trafficking directly to the classroom, and educates school staff about how to identify victims of trafficking. These resources can help a child who is being trafficked and hopefully, prevent a child from falling victim to human trafficking."

Torlakson also said schools are a "prime hunting ground" for traffickers.

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, California has the highest number of human trafficking cases reported in the nation.

The average age of victims forced into sex trafficking and prostitution is 11 to 14 years old, for both boys and girls, according to national statistics.

"Law enforcement and social services see it on a regular basis (in Humboldt County)," Bohn told the Times-Standard.

HOW PROTECT WORKS

The PROTECT program applies a three-pronged approach to dealing with the issue of human trafficking.

First, county leaders, educators and community professionals are trained — this will begin in the spring and training will take place during the summer, ahead of next school year.

In the fall, age-appropriate curriculum will be offered to the more than 5,600 Humboldt County students in fifth, seventh, ninth and 11th grades.

The third element is providing response protocols for potential victims of trafficking.

Educational leaders who have watched the program as it develops are impressed with what has been showcased.

“I walked through some of the focus groups and some of their efforts to get feedback,” Gordon Jackson of the California Department of Education said. “I was very, very pleased with the differentiations. For fifth-graders, they don’t even talk about the word sex. They talk about, ‘Can one person own another person?’ They go about in an interesting way so that it’s progressive. They build on their past learning. It’s done in a very sensitive and well-fashioned manner.”

He said one lesson for younger children includes the use of a hula hoop as an example of personal space and safe spaces.

“ ‘Would you allow someone to slip under the hula hoop and allow somebody to be with you?’ ” Jackson said the kids were asked.

The actual word “trafficking” isn’t used until later grades.

“They do spend a lot of time trying to hit home,” Jackson said, “really talking about personal space and personal safety.”

He said one of the goals is to bring students and educational leaders to the point where they can recognize when someone is being trafficked or when there are potentially dangerous situations.

“This whole notion of prevention ... when we know what there is to do, then we are more likely to do it,” he said. “The whole notion of getting people to step up, that there is something off, there is something disturbing, is incredibly important.

“We feel it’s incredibly important to notice those signs,” he continued. “(If) a student is wearing designer clothes; a student is talking about travels that don’t involve their

parents; when a student is quiet. The more that we increase opportunities for adults that are advocates, the more likely it is that we can intervene.”

The program is being launched in 35 rural California counties — five started this year; 11, including Humboldt County, are set for next school year; and the final 19 will begin the following year.

The Rural County Representative of California provided funding for the program to launch. The program is also backed by the National Homebuyers Fund.

“We’ve committed to funding up to \$388,000 for the rollout,” RCRC’s Justin Caporusso said, adding, “the PROTECT program itself will need ongoing funding.”

He said the organization saw a need and is working to fill it.

“The rural counties really stepped up to recognize that this is a huge problem in California,” Caporusso said. “And are looking for ways to prevent it through education.”

LOCAL EFFORTS

Elle Snow, a Humboldt County survivor of sex trafficking who runs the anti-trafficking organization Game Over, is already involved in providing education to some local schools on the issue.

While she is unfamiliar with the specifics of the PROTECT program, she is familiar with other anti-trafficking curriculum.

“A bit of an issue I have noticed with most state-approved trafficking programs is that they stop at the red flags and resources,” she said. “They tend to not get into how to work with someone who has been trafficked. From what I’ve seen, it tends to be a class on how to avoid it and how to report it, not how to actually help. Hopefully, this program goes past red flags and resources.”

She said she has augmented some of what she has seen lacking with sharing her own experiences with students, which can help drive the issue home.

“Something I’ve done in the past is teach the mandated class as is and then add my piece of healing, recovery, and hope afterward,” she said.

Tina Taylor-Sims, another local survivor of sex trafficking has recently been working in schools talking about the issue as part of the Prevention Project.

Later this month, the program will begin to be implemented at Eureka High School in 11 freshmen-oriented classes, according to Samantha Bredeson, the media coordinator for the Eureka Faith Center and EPI (Empower. Protect. Invest.), the organization that

oversees the implementation of the Prevention Project curriculum. A pilot of the program was recently completed at St. Bernard's.

"I was part of the pilot program that was introduced at St. Bernard's," Taylor-Sims said. "The majority of the response from the children was that they had no idea what was going on."

Now that's changed. She said that after she shared her story with others, one student told her they realized they had been in potentially hazardous situation without even realizing it.

" 'An older guy flirting with me could have possibly been a trafficker trying to lure,' " the teen told Taylor-Sims, she said.

Taylor-Sims said that if there had been programs like this when she was in school a couple decades ago, it could have made a big difference.

"Nobody recognized that while I was in school I went from a charismatic, outgoing student to being withdrawn," she said. "It made me a prime candidate to be victimized by a trafficker."

Later this year, Taylor-Sims will be working with the Boys & Girls Club of the Redwoods to assist them as they work on anti-trafficking efforts.

Liz Smith, executive director of the clubs, recognizes that the children in her programs are among those who are often target by traffickers: "Ten percent of the kids coming in everyday are homeless; 5 percent of the kids identify as being in foster care," Smith said.

"Her first step in working with us is talking with our staff," Smith said. "She will also be talking with our kids."

Taylor-Sims said education makes the difference.

"I confided in a friend and she didn't know what to do because she wasn't educated," Taylor-Sims said. "If they are educated, they will know what to do with it."

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