

Hotels Help Fight Human Trafficking: Chattanooga Company May Be First in Tennessee to Get Certification

Something was just a little off with the man and girl in the elevator.

The girl was looking down, timid and quiet. She was maybe 5 or 6, wearing dirty clothes. The man with the girl was talking to another man in the elevator. They exchanged emails.

"It was just an eerie feeling," said Carmela Simmons, a lobby attendant at the DoubleTree by Hilton in downtown Chattanooga.

"Most kids look around, play, try to press buttons on the elevator. This little girl was like no eye contact, no nothing."

Then the door slid open and the man and girl were gone.

Months later, Simmons, an employee of Chattanooga-based hotel company Vision Hospitality Group Inc., went through the company's new human trafficking awareness training -- and she thought back to that moment in the elevator.

"I'm like, that didn't even look right," Simmons said. "But you really can't say what was going on."

Vision Hospitality is on track to be the first Tennessee-based company to become a member of the Tourism Child Protection Code of Conduct, a certification given by End Child Prostitution and Trafficking, an international organization that fights human trafficking.

Vision Hospitality created a training program that's designed to help employees prevent, recognize and combat human trafficking, which the U.S. Department of Homeland Security calls modern-day slavery -- the illegal trade of people for exploitation or commercial gain.

And while it's been happening for decades, human trafficking is misunderstood and often overlooked by both the tourism industry and the general public.

Bill Mish, general manager at the DoubleTree, spearheaded Vision's training-- which will be mandatory for the company's about 1,000 employees -- and said he was surprised by what he learned.



WATCH FOR THE SIGNS

A human trafficking victim might:

- Tend not to make eye contact
- Lack identification documents
- Be inappropriately dressed for the season
- Have few or no personal possessions
- Have restricted or controlled communication
- Claim to be an adult but look like an adolescent
- Appear fearful, anxious, submissive or depressed

"Everything I thought and all my preconceived ideas about human trafficking were 100 percent wrong," he said.

It doesn't happen only in sketchy roadside hotels, he found out. The average victim is young, younger than 15. Traffickers don't target just one race, or just foreign victims. And it happens everywhere; people just miss it.

"It's kind of like this: I bought this blue Ford truck and I had never seen it on the road, ever," Mish said. "And the minute I bought it, I started seeing my truck everywhere. You don't recognize it until you look for it. I never looked before. It was a forest-through-the-trees kind of thing."

Human trafficking doesn't work like it used to -- it's rare to find victims out on street corners looking for johns, said Ann Coulter, a volunteer with the Women's Fund of Greater Chattanooga. Yet 78 of Tennessee's 95 counties -- that's 85 percent of the state -- reported at least one instance of human trafficking in the two years before a 2011 study by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Hamilton County alone reported more than 100 cases of adult sex trafficking and between 26 and 50 cases of minor trafficking, according to the study.

"This is pretty much a hidden crime," Coulter said. "These girls are not being put on the street because it can be so easily arranged over the Internet. You and I walking to a movie at night aren't going to see this crime. But lodging-industry workers are in a position to know what they're seeing."

Mish hopes to take Vision's training and spread it throughout the state with help from the Tennessee Hospitality Association.

"As an industry, it's something we need to recognize," he said. "Obviously we want to be ahead of it, so we can deter these idiots from coming onto our properties to begin with."

Vision Hospitality is all but approved for membership with ECPAT -- the application has cleared all the requirements but still needs a final stamp of approval from the Code's international board, which meets just a few times a year.

Back on the ground level, a newly trained Simmons is keeping her eyes peeled. Now that she knows what to look for, she would report an incident like the one in the elevator to her direct boss, who could call the police or a human trafficking hot line. And that's the point, said Mitch Patel, Vision Hospitality president and CEO.

"We don't want to alarm people, but the bottom line is that these girls are 12, 13 years old," he said. "And I've got a 12-year-old. So it hits home. It's scary, right? If we can help one person, I'll feel like we've done our best."

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