

## Spring Hill group warns of human trafficking problem

For years now, the national and world news has been talking about human trafficking.

It happens in foreign countries like Cambodia and other Asian countries.

But did you know human trafficking happens in the U.S.? It happens in Tennessee and even Maury County, according to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation?

Twenty-seven million people were trafficked last year, more than anytime in history, according to Taryn Clausing, with the Spring Hill chapter of End Slavery Tennessee (EST).

“Eighteen- to twenty thousand people are trafficked across the U.S. borders annually,” she said. “Eighty three percent of the victims in confirmed sex-trafficking incidents were identified as U.S. citizens.”

She said the average age of a trafficked person is 12 to 14 years of age, and that 33 percent of all runaways will be sexually exploited within 48 hours.

“Ninety percent of runaways will ultimately end up in the commercial sex trade,” she said.

In Tennessee, 85 of the state’s 95 counties reported at least one case of human trafficking in 2011. Included in those counties was Maury, where six to 15 cases of minors being trafficked were reported by the TBI in 2011. There were also 15 reports of adults being trafficked that year.

“It’s highly likely that the statistics are much higher, because more recent statistics are higher as the crime rate has grown, and awareness, identification and reporting have increased,” she said.

In Tennessee, an average of 94 children are trafficked every month, she noted.

But the problem just isn’t in Maury County. It could just as easily happen in Williamson County.

“We have three or four major highways coming into Nashville and the roads just spread out from there,” she noted. “That’s why we’re here. We want to educate people about it, but we also need volunteers to help out.”

She said part of EST’s mission is to train the police, health workers, lawyers and legislators about the problem.

Most of the victims are girls, although some are boys, she noted. Crime statistics by national and state law enforcement bureau’s state that human trafficking is the number two crime behind the drug trade in the U.S. she said.

“People only sell a drug one time,” she noted. “But humans can be sold over and over.”

EST has a team of people that talks to schools and other groups about trafficking. Others are volunteers that help the victims with “aftercare.”

That’s where they are given an emergency kit of necessities such as toiletries, gift cards and other items once they’ve been rescued.

“We have volunteers around the state,” she said. “We’re raising money to help fund the emergency kits. They help the victims get established and onto a life of recovery.”

She said the victims are “not just from broken homes, are (not) poor or are (not always) drug addicts.”

Getting trafficked can take place at a mall, shopping center or other public area, she noted.

“People in both Williamson and Maury Counties need to be aware of this problem,” she said. “Their son or daughter could be approached by traffickers. The parents need to have the right conversations with their child in order to keep them safe.

“The people who are trafficking look just like us. It’s not necessarily gang related. They promise the victims something they might not have in their life. Young people need to be aware how they can be trapped online. There are a lot of ways the traffickers do it, but they usually will flatter the victim once. After that, the victim is putty in their hands.”

The Spring Hill chapter of the EST is currently looking for volunteers and funds to provide emergency kits.

“We would like volunteers to help any way they can,” she said. “They can help as much as they want or event just provide a \$25 Kroger gift card every month. Every little bit helps.

“When they’re shopping, if they just buy one item that’s extra, then in a month, that could add up to an entire emergency kit.”

The group meets the first Monday of each month at 7 p.m. at the Red Oak Cafe in Columbia. Anyone interested in helping is welcome to attend.

For more information, email [springhillgroup@endslaverytn.org](mailto:springhillgroup@endslaverytn.org). The TBI Human Trafficking Hotline is (855) 558-6484.