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# Sex trafficking: Practice growing problem in state

## County officials host conference to educate law officials, public

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Posted: Monday, January 12, 2015 8:44 am

By Brian Wright, Maricopa Monitor

FLORENCE — With human trafficking, also known as sex trafficking, becoming a more dangerous problem in today's society, Pinal County officials hosted a conference on Thursday aimed at increasing awareness and education among law enforcement and the public.

The Pinal County Attorney's Office and Truckers Against Trafficking sponsored the conference, which was held at the Pinal County Sheriff's Office headquarters and included heavy involvement by PCSO. The conference hosted about 50 people, mostly from law enforcement, to provide specific training to officers on how to recognize and attack sex trafficking.

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The event was made possible with grant funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

About five PCSO employees received the training. Other agencies that sent employees included police departments in Maricopa, Casa Grande, Phoenix, Coolidge, Eloy, Apache Junction, Scottsdale, Tucson, Mesa and Marana, in addition to representatives from the FBI and Homeland Security Investigations.

Also on hand for the public to tour was a long trucking trailer that was outfitted with flat-screen TVs displaying videos about sex trafficking and glass display cases that had items retrieved from victims of trafficking, such as dog tags, lipstick and sandals.

Sheriff Paul Babeu told the Maricopa Monitor that sex trafficking doesn't receive the same attention as drug

trafficking or human smuggling, and the impetus behind the trucking initiative and the training conference for law enforcement is to make sure people know the warning signs and how to prevent children from being sold into what amounts to modern-day slavery.

"What we're trying to do is educate, not just detectives ... but the public," he said.

Babeu said that in the past, law enforcement went after the prostitutes and the pimps, but he said today there must be a look at the larger picture — the "underlying issues" of why children are lured into the trade.

The Internet is where a lot of it starts; Babeu said many children — mostly girls, but also some boys — are stalked by online predators on social media sites. The predators usually target young teens — 13, 14 and 15 years old — who have low self-esteem or problems at home.

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They may lure these teens with promises of jobs or a place to stay if they're planning on running away from home. But the children end up being sold for sex and are often physically abused by those running the sex trade.

County Attorney Lando Voyles said the sale of these children over the Internet has increased 1,500 percent in the last four years. And while sex trafficking is a nationwide problem, Arizona is ranked as one of the worst states. In a statement, Babeu said Pinal County is one of the "most active counties in the United States" for sex trafficking.

Voyles said it's important to get out in front of the problem instead of waiting to respond after the fact.

"If we're not proactive, we lose," he said.

Voyles also acknowledged the timing of the event was important, with the Super Bowl coming to Glendale on Feb. 1. The Super Bowl attracts more sex trafficking than any other event in America.

Voyles said people who are purchasing sex at an event like the Super Bowl feel there is safety in the fact they can leave that city a day or two after the criminal act and escape prosecution.

"People think what they do in Phoenix will stay in Phoenix, but it won't," he said.

Kendis Paris, executive director of Truckers Against Trafficking, said she's excited to take the trailer, called the Freedom Drivers Project, across the country to educate people and ultimately save potential sex trafficking victims. She said the general public needs to realize sex trafficking isn't a foreign problem.

"People think this is a Third World problem, and it doesn't happen in the U.S.," she said. "And that's exactly what the pimps are counting on."

But what's most rewarding for Paris is she's seen the effectiveness of the project.

"I'm very passionate about this because I've seen it work," she said.

Tony Bradley, president and CEO of the Arizona Trucking Association, said truckers can notice warning signs at truck stops and make a difference in stopping sex trafficking. He said very young girls dressed in scanty clothing can be a red flag, and he also said sometimes it's helpful for a trucker to just ask these children if they need help or to engage them in conversation.

Sometimes that leads to their admitting they are in danger, and the trucker can call the police.

"We can no longer stand idly by and let these crimes happen," Bradley said. "We're trying to be part of the solution."

Reach Maricopa Monitor News Editor Brian Wright at 568-4198 or [bwright@copamonitor.com](mailto:bwright@copamonitor.com).



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