

Program teaches Springfield truckers how to save victims of sex trafficking

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(Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)

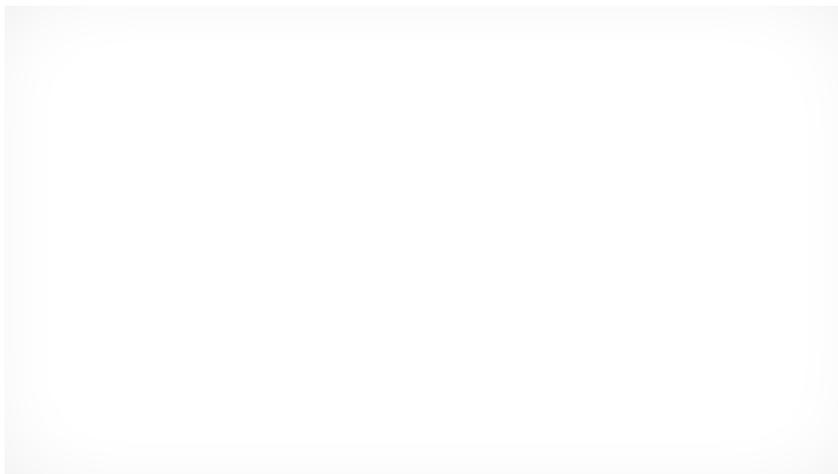
Ruby Karnes drove big rigs for more than 20 years.

She and her husband traveled across the country, from the Great Plains to the streets of New York City.

It wasn't until recently, however, that Karnes realized all that she might have missed along the way.

Karnes is now the lead instructor at Specialized Driver Training on East Division Street, where she teaches students how to drive, back up, parallel park — and save victims of sex trafficking.

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Specialized Driver Training (<http://www.specializeddrivertraining.com/>) is one of three organizations in Springfield that is a registered partner with Truckers Against Trafficking, a nonprofit that shows truck drivers how to recognize and help victims of human trafficking they might encounter on the roadways or at truck stops.

"I just wish there was more information out there when we were driving," Karnes said.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center defines human trafficking as a modern form of slavery in which victims are forced into commercial sex acts or labor services. The organization says there were 61 reported human trafficking cases in Missouri through the first six months of this year.

Helen Van Dam, with Truckers Against Trafficking (<http://www.truckersagainstrafficking.org/>), said truck drivers are uniquely positioned to spot human trafficking since traffickers sometimes use truck stops to fuel up or look for customers.

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Eric Jones, an instructor at Specialized Driver Training, sits in the cab of a truck at the school. Students are being taught how to recognize and report sex trafficking while on the road. (Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)

"There are 3 million (truck drivers) out there," Van Dam said. "They are already trained to be vigilant, so to be vigilant for this is something that is right in their wheelhouse."

Van Dam said companies that partner with Truckers Against Trafficking show their drivers a video that breaks down some of the stereotypes about the sex industry and explains to drivers some of the signs of sex trafficking — like minors soliciting sex, women with tattoos that indicate ownership or men coming to truck stops at night with vehicles full of women.

The drivers are also given logos to put in their windows with the number for the [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/) (<https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/>) (1-888-373-7888) and little brochures to keep in their wallets that describe how and when to report possible human trafficking.

Van Dam said 240,000 drivers are registered as being trained by Truckers Against Trafficking, and they have generated more than 1,400 hotline calls that led to more than 450 human trafficking cases with about 1,000 victims.

Patrick Wilkins, owner of Specialized Driver Training, said he heard about the program about a month ago and wanted his company to get involved.

"A lot of this stuff happens at truck stops and places where there might not be a lot of eyes from the community around — other than truck drivers," Wilkins said.

He said so far his students have been receptive to the training.

"A lot of the men we train have daughters and wives," Wilkins said. "They value this."

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Jeremy Chaney, right, along with other students at Specialized Driver Training, watch a video on sex trafficking. (Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)

Wilkins explained that Springfield's central location in the country, proximity to Interstate 44 and low cost of living make it a popular location for transportation companies.

He said he would like to see more companies in the Springfield area partner with Truckers Against Trafficking.

A spokesman for Springfield-based Prime Inc., which employs 7,000 drivers, said last week the company plans to partner with Truckers Against Trafficking in the near future.

The Missouri Department of Transportation also works with Truckers Against Trafficking to raise awareness about human trafficking.

Don Ledford, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, said he didn't have exact figures for how many human trafficking cases his office has prosecuted in the last few years because those cases aren't always charged under the human trafficking statute.

He said, however, that the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri has an active human trafficking task force that works with state, local and federal agencies.

"It has been a priority, and we have had some significant human trafficking cases," Ledford said.

Van Dam, with Truckers Against Trafficking, said the goal of the program is not to admonish truckers but rather encourage them to speak out and do their part to rescue victims of sex trafficking across the country.

"The trucking industry is not the enemy here, they are the solution," Van Dam said. "They are the heroes out on the road. They are the ones who see this and call it in."

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Students at Specialized Driver Training are being taught how to recognize and report sex trafficking while on the road. *(Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)*

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