



Executive director's update: Help end human trafficking in Texas

By Bryan Collier



Human trafficking is the illegal trade of human beings; literally, a modern-day form of slavery. This crime usually involves forced labor or sexual exploitation of vulnerable people, even children, by criminal predators.

With its busy international border crossings and diverse population, Texas is an attractive location for those who buy and sell people for profit. Studies at the University of Texas estimate that there are more than 300,000 victims of human trafficking in Texas, including 79,000 young victims of sex trafficking.

To protect vulnerable people and bring these would-be slaveholders to justice, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) of Texas has produced an important video which dispels the myths and describes the realities of human trafficking. "Be the One in the Fight Against Human Trafficking" explains how to help prevent trafficking, and how to recognize its warning signs so you can take appropriate action to stop it.

In addition, the Office of the Texas Governor has proposed training all state employees to recognize and report potential trafficking. The "Preventing Crime, Protecting Texans, Punishing Criminals" policy initiative proposes the creation of a new law-enforcement unit to pursue and arrest traffickers, and increased criminal penalties for anyone forcing a victim into prostitution.

Because TDCJ employees work in locations all around the state, from crowded cities to rural areas and the highways in between, we have a unique opportunity help stop human trafficking in Texas.

Nearly 25,000 Correctional Institutions Division (CID) employees at facilities all around the state have viewed the "Be the One" video, including CID staff who interview offenders during intake, and who might be the first to recognize the warning signs that an incoming offender might be a human trafficker.

TDCJ's Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division (MAL) has joined the Truckers Against Trafficking (TAT) program, which teaches drivers and other trucking industry employees how to recognize and report domestic sex trafficking. TAT has



contributed to an increase in the number of reports of possible human trafficking, resulting in more victim recoveries and criminal arrests. Through TAT training, MAL Division drivers, dispatchers, terminal managers and equipment operators will learn the characteristic behaviors of trafficking victims, common locations where trafficking occurs and how to report suspicious activity. Training posters will be placed at the agency's truck terminals and TAT decals will be placed on the agency's tractor trucks.

Parole Division staff members located all across the state work every day to help put an end to human trafficking. Nearly two thousand parole officers serve as trained witnesses to recognize the warning signs and report suspicious behavior. In addition, Parole Division executive staff has watched the OAG's "Be the One" video and forwarded the program to many of the division's 2,300 employees for viewing. Awareness and discussion of the human trafficking problem have significantly increased during Parole staff meetings, and many employees have taken the initiative to share the video with family, friends, as well as church and community groups.

TDCJ's Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD) has, for years, trained community corrections professionals about human trafficking and its cruelties. In 2013, the Texas Office of the Attorney General conducted a workshop, in conjunction with CJAD's Skills

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for Effective Supervision Conference, which examined factors and warning signs associated with the sex trade and human trafficking, and the subject was also covered in 2017 as part of the division's Virtual Skills Conference. Guest speakers from the Texas Department of Public Safety's Criminal Investigation Division and the Maryland Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention provided information about human trafficking and the substance abuse issues associated with the sex trade. In addition, all CJAD staff members have viewed the "Be the One" video, and the program has been shared with all 123 local community supervision and corrections departments.

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is TDCJ's primary law enforcement and investigative entity, and OIG investigators are certified Texas Peace Officers trained to fight human trafficking, including victim identification and rescue techniques, victim assistance and service referrals, and incident investigation and prosecution. Using practical case studies, OIG investigators learn how to build a coordinated community response to fight human trafficking on a state, national and international scale. In addition to officer training, civilian OIG staff members viewed the "Be the One" video to learn how to recognize and prevent human trafficking.

Every day, OIG task force investigators and their colleagues work to disrupt and dismantle these organizations, and eliminate them as a threat to the citizens of Texas and the United States. OIG investigators also work with federal, state, and local agencies to combat human trafficking, and investigators

assigned to multi-agency groups like Texas Anti-Gang Centers and Joint Terrorism Task Forces target criminal organizations and transnational gangs involved in almost every type of crime. These task forces coordinate law enforcement agencies who focus on exposing and putting an end to criminal activities like human trafficking and sexploitation.

I encourage every TDCJ staff member to "be the one" who takes up the fight against human trafficking by learning how to recognize the warning signs and take appropriate action so victims can escape their captivity and those who commit these terrible crimes are brought to justice. ▲

The following warning signs may indicate that human trafficking may be occurring, but keep in mind that these are only warning signs and are not proof of a crime.

- Victims are often restricted in movement and communications. Many are unable to ask for help.
- Victims often avoid eye contact and have gaps in their memory.
- Victims may resist physical contact and have visible bruises or scars. They often appear malnourished or show signs of addiction.
- Victims typically have low self-esteem, and may seem depressed or anxious, with occasional angry outbursts.
- Victims often have few possessions and live in an unstable or abusive home where they can be controlled by an older individual.
- Traffickers can play the role of the victim's parent, mentor or friend.
- Children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, and both traffickers and their victims can be found in schools, playgrounds and other places frequented by young people.

If you are approached by an alleged victim, make sure they are safe, assure them they did the right thing by reaching out, and report the situation to law enforcement. Do not attempt to address the problem yourself.

If you suspect someone of human trafficking, inform law enforcement so they can make a proper investigation. You can also report suspected trafficking by calling the Texas Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-5400, the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, or by contacting TDCJ's Victim Services Division at 1-800-848-4284.