

## Maryland's Human Trafficking Task Force Focuses on Safety of State's Most Vulnerable Youth

Over the past decade, the issue of human trafficking has received increased national attention in an effort to raise awareness and combat this form of modern day slavery here in the United States. Human trafficking is no longer seen as an international problem, but one that is ever-present in our own communities here in Maryland and across the country. Last month, President Obama signed into law the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. One of the provisions of this law requires state child welfare agencies to identify and provide appropriate services for children involved in the child welfare system who have been identified as victims of sex trafficking or at risk of becoming victims.

Fortunately, Maryland has been working to address the issue of sex trafficking for vulnerable populations within its own child welfare and juvenile service systems for several years now. In 2007, the United States Attorney's Office, the Attorney General of Maryland, and the State's Attorney for Baltimore City formed the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MHTTF). The MHTTF has grown to become a multidisciplinary team of local government and non-governmental agencies and organizations committed to providing justice and support for victims, as well as creating legislative and policy change at the system level.

The MHTTF is comprised of five subcommittees (The Victim Services Subcommittee, Legislative Subcommittee, Public Awareness Subcommittee, Training Subcommittee, and Law Enforcement Subcommittee). The Victim Services (VS) Subcommittee has worked closely with the Departments of Human Resources (DHR) and Juvenile Services (DJS) to help these agencies identify and respond to victims of human trafficking. Involvement in the child welfare system is seen as one of the primary risk factors for Human Trafficking. This is due to the fact that youth in out-of-home care most often meet criteria for the additional risk factors of exploitation, including unstable home environments, a history of childhood sexual abuse, lack of connections with positive and intimate adult relationships, excessive absences/truancy from school, and a history of runaway behavior.

In 2012, the Maryland Legislature passed a bill amending the definition of "sexual abuse" to specifically include human trafficking, child pornography, and prostitution of a child. This change in the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Code allows a domestic minor sex trafficking victim to be considered an abused child, and in turn could allow a victim to be considered a



Child in Need of Assistance (CINA), who may be taken into custody and receive shelter care (GOCCP, 2012).

Following the passage of this bill, the VS Subcommittee began working alongside DHR/DJS to assist those agencies in developing procedures for screening and identification to assess risk for victimization, as well as coordination of services for youth identified as victims. Turn Around, Inc., a local service provider for survivors of trafficking in Maryland, took a lead role in this project. Some of the accomplishments resulting from the partnership between Turn Around, Inc. and DHR/DJS have included developing and piloting a questionnaire to screen for risk factors and indicators of sex trafficking with youth who have been arrested and placed into juvenile detention. In addition, Turn Around, Inc. has worked with DHR to develop a protocol with Child Protective Services and DHR's Intake/Placement Unit to refer youth for emergency shelter care when they are discovered and identified as victims of sex trafficking.

Screening and service provision for victims of sex trafficking and populations who are at risk of trafficking will continue to expand and improve here in Maryland. Last month the University of Maryland, School of Social Work, in partnership with DHR, DJS, the Baltimore City Health Department, and several community partners were awarded a five year grant through the Federal Administration for Children and Families to address child sex trafficking within the child welfare and juvenile justice populations. One of the major barriers to understanding our system's capacity needs for establishing services for victims of trafficking has been the inability to accurately identify the numbers of those children already being served within our systems. Looking ahead, Maryland is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of the national response to create an infrastructure of effective interventions and practices that will promote better screening, assessment, and services for victims of trafficking in our state and decrease the risk of sex trafficking for children involved in our child welfare and juvenile service systems.

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