

Conference targets problem of forced-labor crimes

While sex-trafficking cases grab headlines, there's a growing problem of people being forced to work as "modern-day slaves."

By [DAVID CHANEN](#), Star Tribune

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They are sometimes called "modern-day slaves" -- illegal immigrants working for low pay with the threat of deportation to keep them from complaining to authorities. Police and social workers say that more than 20,000 people are brought into the United States each year by exploitative labor traffickers, and that at least half the victims are children.

While sex trafficking often grabs the headlines, the 50 people attending a labor trafficking conference Friday in St. Paul agreed that more attention and education needs to be focused on the growing problem.

"We know there are lots of victims of labor trafficking in Minnesota, but they don't get talked about a lot," said Vednita Carter, executive director of Breaking Free, an organization that serves women involved in prostitution and the organizer of the conference.

It's not that Minnesota isn't active in researching and prosecuting human-traffickers. State law mandates an annual report on trafficking patterns and victims, and law enforcement agencies have a statewide task force, which currently has 37 open sex and labor trafficking cases.

St. Paul officer Heather Weyker, a member of the task force, said labor trafficking victims generally are in the agricultural, janitorial, hospitality and food-service industries, or they work in "sweatshop" factories.

State law defines trafficking as the illegal "recruitment, transportation, harboring, enticement, obtaining or receipt of a person by any means, whether a U.S. citizen or foreign national." It can be for forced labor, slavery or practices similar to slavery, or the removal of organs through coercion or intimidation. Labor cases often are more difficult to pursue than sex cases, because it's harder to get access to the victims, Weyker said.

No one's complaining

"You just can't walk into a company you think is involved in trafficking and just start poking around," she said. "We know the victims are out there; we just aren't receiving the complaints."

In May, 12 people -- eight of them from Uzbekistan -- were accused in a federal indictment of luring illegal immigrants to work in 14 U.S. states, including Minnesota. The defendants used

false information to obtain fake work visas for the workers. The defendants threatened the workers with deportation while forcing them to live in substandard apartments and shorting their pay.

The Minnesota connection to the case involves Mankato-based Kato Roofing Inc., which hired workers from Chile, Ukraine, Bolivia and Yugoslavia through one of the labor companies that came under federal scrutiny. The indictments do not accuse the Mankato company of wrongdoing.

There are 38 human-trafficking task forces in the United States, but labor trafficking made up only 12 percent of their cases in past two years, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Successful cases can bring hefty sentences. This month, a 57-year-old Houston man got 13 years in federal prison for his role in smuggling Central American women and girls into the United States. He was also ordered to pay \$1.7 million in restitution to the victims.

132 agencies cite cases

Minnesota's annual trafficking report includes a voluntary survey of police, nurses and agencies that work with victims. The 2008 report says 132 agencies reported helping a trafficking victim in the previous three years. Some were forced to beg and others were forced to work at churches, according to the report. More than 30 percent of sex traffickers forced their victims into stripping and pornography.

Romeo Ramirez, from the Coalition for Immokalee Workers in Florida, described the group's most recent investigation, to expose labor trafficking at a tomato farm. Several dozen workers recruited to the farm were told they already had enormous debts to work off before they had picked their first tomato. Speaking through an interpreter, Ramirez said workers had to pay the employer to sleep in the back of a truck or shower with a hose. Those who complained were tied up at night or beaten in front of the others, he said.

To make \$50 a day, workers had to pick 2 tons of tomatoes, he said. Word of the trafficking leaked after some workers escaped and told social workers, he said.

Once exposed, the company had to sign a code of conduct guaranteeing wage increases and zero tolerance for physical abuse. Whole Foods stopped buying the company's tomatoes, and two people from the company were sentenced to 12 years in prison, Ramirez said. As the result of other trafficking cases, the coalition secured agreements from Burger King, Subway and several food services to work only with companies that agree to sign the code of conduct.

"We have to force companies to be socially responsible," he said.

"They can't only produce fresh food, but fair food."

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