Educatin young vicitms

Speakers from the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's Office and the FBI recently organized a seminar detailing the ongoing battle against human trafficking. Pictured are Rotary Club District Gov. Larry Herman, left, Assistant State Attorney Leah Klein, Florida Atlantic University Police Lt. James McDowell, Broward Sheriff's Capt. Kevin Butler and FBI Special Agent James Lewis.

Law enforcement stresses media literacy in human trafficking fight

BY DEBORAH WORK
Staff writer

Human sex trafficking was the issue at Florida Atlantic University's Davie campus last month when speakers from the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's Office and the FBI discussed the complexity of spotting offenders and their victims.

Hosted by the Rotary Clubs of South Florida, the symposium focused on how South Florida hotels and motels are used by those involved in human trafficking. Leah Klein, assistant state attorney and division chief for the domestic crimes unit, said the data illustrates how increased awareness results in more cases being prosecuted.

For example, she said, in January 2012, only three human trafficking-related cases were open or being prosecuted by Miami-Dade investigators. By January of 2016, the number was up to 350.

Klein said popular culture's glamorization of criminal activity, combined with high levels of children's media consumption, could possibly fuel an increase in human sex trafficking activity. She pointed to statistics showing that children between the ages of 6 to 18 spend 2,000 hours with their parents, 11,000 in school and almost 51,000 hours devouring media.

"What is the solution? To make our kids media literate," Klein said. "The advertising world understands how media influences kids. In fact, $17 billion a year is spent in advertising directly related to children. So media literacy must include teaching critical skills so children understand the fantasy of what is going on in the world versus the reality."

FBI Agent Jim Lewis said he believes many of the young Florida women on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children website are involved in trafficking.

"These are our kids. That's my daughter, your daughter, that's any kid from Weston, Parkland, Coral Springs, Dania. They are from all over," said Lewis, who specializes in child exploitation and human trafficking.

"It runs the full gamut of our society. And we know that 1 in 5 runaway kids, according to the National Center, is involved in sex trafficking."

Lewis said offenders — pimps — prey on girls at malls and at school; they infiltrate group homes and shelters, taking advantage of runaways and the homeless.

"We think this only happens in so-called bad neighborhoods but really it can happen anywhere," said Capt. Kevin Butler, BSO's Weston District Chief.

Billie Morgan, a behavioral health and special needs program manager at Broward 2-1-1, said their hotline is a confidential 24-hour help line providing crisis, health and human services support and is a resource everyone should know about.

"If you're a victim of human trafficking, how do you get help? We're the place to start," Morgan said.

Shari Roth, of the Rotary Club of Weston, pointed out that as awareness of the issue increases, so will an effective infrastructure to deal with it.

"This symposium gets the information out and sheds light on an important subject," said Roth. "There is much more to learn and so much more we can do."

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