

By Cara Coyne Sawyer

January 1st marks the start of National Human Trafficking Awareness Month. As the Chair of the Delaware Human Trafficking Interagency Coordinating Council (HTICC), I would like to take this opportunity to discuss with you what human trafficking is, what it looks like, and what you can do to help individuals who are being trafficked or are at risk of being trafficked.

Human trafficking is the business of stealing another person's freedom for profit. This multi-billion-dollar criminal industry denies freedom to over 25 million people globally. The most common forms are labor and sex trafficking. Contrary to popular belief, human trafficking doesn't have to include taking a person against their will. In fact, most victims report that they were trafficked by someone close to them.

Victims are often hidden in plain sight. You likely already have, or will, encounter someone in a situation of concern. Let me share a story about someone I know who survived.

My friend, Mia, experienced sex trafficking as a young adult, although nothing about her upbringing was out of the norm. She was born into a nice family, in a nice town, but struggled with self-worth. Mia craved attention and longed to be desired, like many 19-year-old girls. When she met the man who would become her trafficker, she was drawn to him because she thought he led an exciting life filled with drugs and sex. Before long, this man whom she believed loved her, had seduced her into having sex with others for money. She gave up her old life and was dependent on this man for love, affection, food, shelter, money, and drugs. At this point, Mia had become addicted to narcotics, which he used to manipulate her. Mia lived like this for 10 years and was raped nearly 20 times.

Today, Mia has been in recovery for 12 years, and is working toward her second master's degree. She works with those who have substance use and mental health challenges. She has family and friends that support and care about her. She has committed her life to help trafficking victims escape and to promote awareness of the issue.

Knowing how to spot the signs could save lives. Here are three ways you can help in the fight against human trafficking:

1. **If you are a victim**, you can get out. Call the Human Trafficking Hotline at **1-888-373-7888**. There are several organizations, like Hope for Justice, that exist to bring an end to modern slavery by preventing exploitation, rescuing victims, restoring lives, and reforming society. For a listing of resources:

<https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/admin/humantrafinteragcouncil.html>

2. **Identify red flags and indicators.** Recognizing key indicators of human trafficking is the first step in identifying victims that can lead to helping to save a life. You can spread the word and raise awareness locally by volunteering with anti-trafficking organizations in your community. Our website can link you to opportunities to help:

<https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/admin/humantrafinteragcouncil.html>

You can also follow us on social media. On Instagram it is @deagainsttht and on Twitter,

@DEAgainstHT, and on Facebook, find us at Delaware Human Trafficking Interagency Coordinating Council.

3. If you work in the health care field, especially behavioral health, there are a number of local and government resources you can promote and share with your clients. Annually, the Department of Homeland Security recognizes January 11th as #WearBlueDay in recognition of human trafficking awareness. Consider organizing a campaign among your colleagues and coworkers to include virtual events, resource distribution, and social media. The Delaware Healthcare Association recommends the use of the Human Trafficking Protocol for screening and identifying possible victims. Information on the protocol can be found on the Delaware Healthcare Association's website at <https://deha.org/resources>

I hope you take a moment to learn more about Human Trafficking this month. Whether it is becoming involved in a local or national organization, coordinating a #WearBlueDay with your place of employment, or even just talking about it with friends or family. With an increase in awareness and knowledge, we can truly make a difference.

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