



Unseen Ties

The Intersection of Homelessness and Human Trafficking in Oklahoma

Human Trafficking Prevention Month is designed to serve as an education tool to the public about human trafficking, and what individuals can do to prevent and respond to human trafficking. [1] “Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.” (Dept. of Human Services) [2] Reports from the Global Slavery Index estimate that there are more than a million human trafficking victims currently across the United States. [3] Typically, these victims of human trafficking are individuals who find themselves in vulnerable or unstable circumstances. While some individuals are more vulnerable to human trafficking than others, it can happen to anyone. Victims of human trafficking can be of any age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, cultural background, or socio-economic class. With the right education on what human trafficking can look like and what can lead to it, communities can effectively put an end to it.

Help for Trafficking Victims and Survivors in Tulsa

The most recent data available from the Human Trafficking Hotline’s website reveals that in 2021, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 438 signals from the state of Oklahoma, with 206 of those signals from victims or survivors of human trafficking. [4] Oklahoma is proactive in addressing human trafficking, as there are three Official Attorney General Certified Adult Victims of Human Trafficking Programs, [5] two of which are A Way Home For Tulsa (AWH4T) partners: Domestic Violence Intervention Services and The Spring. [6][7]. Trafficking victims experiencing homelessness can connect with any AWH4T service providers to be promptly connected to the proper resources.

AWH4T is a collective impact of over 50 voting organizations that exists to plan and implement strategies that support a system of outreach, engagement, assessment, prevention, and evaluation for those experiencing homelessness, or those persons at risk of homelessness, within Tulsa City/County.

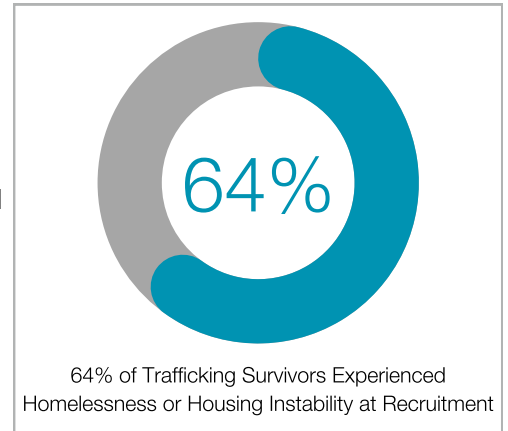
“As it relates to the crime of human trafficking, traffickers prey upon vulnerabilities. Anyone who may be experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity becomes an easy target for a trafficker. Looking to meet a need, traffickers will offer housing or work as a way to coerce a victim into the commercial sex industry or into being exploited for free or cheap labor.

Increasing access to low-barrier, safe, and affordable housing for those experiencing homelessness in our community is guaranteed to reduce the number of victims falling prey to traffickers. As economic vulnerabilities in individuals decrease, so does their risk of being trafficked. As a community, we must wake up every day more committed to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable than the traffickers, otherwise, the number of victims in our city will continue to rise.”

– Leslie Clingenpeel, Executive Director at The Spring

Human Trafficking and its Ties to Homelessness

Due to the heightened vulnerability, individuals experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity are at a higher risk of being trafficked. [8] Lack of stability and limited resource access make folks more susceptible to exploitation. A survey given to survivors of human trafficking reveals that 64% of survivor respondents reported experiencing homelessness or housing instability at the time they were recruited into their exploitation. [9] The second highest risk factor or vulnerability for being trafficked for sex is being a youth who has run away or is experiencing homelessness. The third highest risk factor for being trafficked for labor is having an unstable housing situation. [10] A study conducted in New Orleans revealed that 19% of the surveyed youth experiencing homelessness identified as survivors of various forms of human trafficking. [11]



It Can Happen to Anyone

Despite the prevailing perception that only individuals facing homelessness or vulnerability are at risk of human trafficking, the reality is that it can affect anyone. In some instances, trafficking victims experience exploitation at the hands of their partners, highlighting the intricate connection between human trafficking and domestic violence. Similar to the uncertainty about a potential partner's abusive tendencies, there is also uncertainty about whether a potential partner might be involved in trafficking. In contrast to widespread misconceptions, human trafficking typically doesn't start with the abduction of strangers. Instead, sex traffickers often employ emotional manipulation through various forms of love, such as romantic, familial, and friendship, to coerce victims into participating in their exploitation. **Traffickers seek out potential victims by looking for individuals with unmet needs, which can include physical needs such as housing or food, or emotional needs, such as companionship or even just a person to talk to.**

What Communities Can Do to Combat Human Trafficking

To end trafficking, communities need to ensure all community members have the things they need – security, financial stability, and social safety nets – to reduce the likelihood of a person being exploited for having those needs. Potential measures to mitigate the impact of human trafficking on Tulsans include:

- Enhancing accessibility to emergency shelters and affordable housing to provide victims with more alternatives.
- Broadening the societal safety net for vulnerable populations and trafficking victims to address their needs adequately.
- Redirecting legal accountability for trafficking towards traffickers and buyers rather than victims and potential victims.
- Become familiar with the warning signs of trafficking situations and ensure community members' needs are met so they are not at risk for exploitation.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline is available 24/7 and can be reached at 888-373-7888. The hotline also receives text messages at 233733. For victims and survivors in the Tulsa area, DVIS can be reached on their 24/7 hotline at 918-743-5763, and The Spring's 24/7 hotline number is 918-245-4075. Help is out there for human trafficking victims and survivors.

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