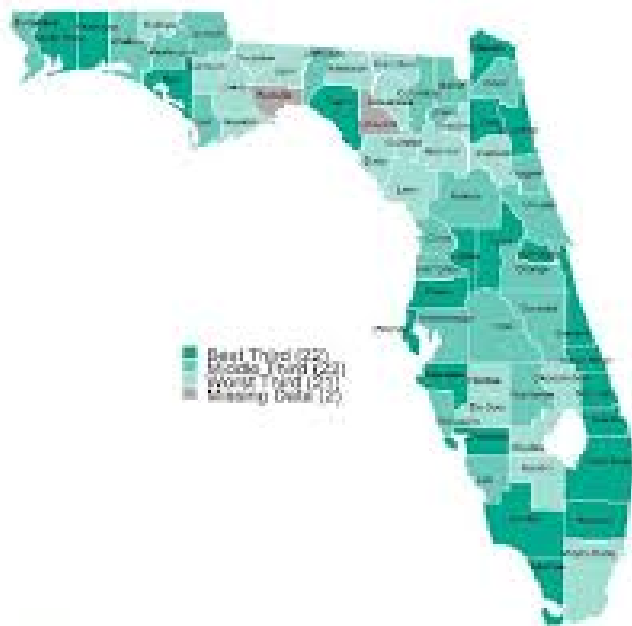


Human Trafficking Awareness for Health Care Workers

By WFSUNEWS • JAN 23, 2018

January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. In Florida – which has the third-highest number of trafficking reports of any state – the response includes training for health care professionals, who often encounter victims in their work but miss the signs.



Note: Not shown aged 18 and older.
Source: ACR analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, accessed through AmericanFact Finder.

Statewide representation of human trafficking case distribution in Florida.

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"When I talk to physicians, nurse practitioners, (physician' assistants), I'm often met with, 'Well, I'm not seeing these patients in my office,'" said Suzanne Harrison, director of clinical programs at the Florida State University College of Medicine.

"But I get that when I train about child abuse and domestic violence and elder abuse, too. Well, they are, but they're not recognizing it."

Harrison said doctors and other health care professionals see patients who are being trafficked all the time – but they don't know it and thus miss out on the chance to help. She cited a 2014 study of trafficking survivors.

"And these women who were interviewed, almost 90 percent of them intersected with the health care industry in some capacity, whether it was an office, Planned Parenthood, an emergency room, the Department of Health. None were identified," Harrison said. "Zero."

Harrison was training about 60 health care professionals on Friday (1/19), as part of the Big Bend's efforts to raise awareness of labor and sex trafficking this month. The training was a collaboration by the state Department of Health, the College of Medicine, and the Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center. Harrison said health care professionals are trained to look for signs of child abuse and domestic violence, and that human trafficking has some parallels. For one thing, the health care professional shouldn't ask about potential abuse unless he or she can get the victim alone.

"We don't want to increase their risk," she explained. "We don't want to increase their risk of serious injury, any kind of harm. And they're likely to be beaten badly after the health care encounter if we ask in front of an abuser, a perpetrator, a trafficker, a pimp—whatever you want to label these people. And so we don't ask if we can't get them alone."

Harrison added it takes a team to identify potential victims, and she advised physicians and others who oversee an office to get their staff trained as well as themselves. Staffers can help connect with the victim one-on-one or distract the trafficker with paperwork. Above all, she said, a little compassion helps to establish trust.

"These young women and men oftentimes haven't eaten all day, and so a little bit of food goes a long way," she said.

Trafficking reports to the Department of Children and Families have gone up since 2009, when DCF added trafficking to its maltreatment index. That year there were just 43 reports. In 2016, there were 1,495 reports, showing why health care professionals – as mandated reporters – can have a huge role in combating modern-day slavery.

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