

BURNER TIPS

COMBATTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING TAKES EVERYONE

Human trafficking hides in the shadows of our society and economy, flourishing in back rooms and alleys and depriving people of their basic human rights and freedoms. No longer state-sanctioned, the sale and subjugation of another person has gone underground, treating people as renewable resources and fracturing lives. As community awareness of this heinous crime increases, law enforcement and victim services providers are looking for creative and innovative ways to fight it. As these experts examine the best and most efficient ways to identify victims of human trafficking, many are focusing on traditional first responders and the emerging category of “first identifiers.”

Home service personnel and utility workers are increasingly being relied upon to serve as the eyes and ears of a community. Consider the recent case of a 10-year-old girl who was kidnapped from a city sidewalk and raped by a 52-year-old Nebraska man. The child was able to escape, seeking help from a utility worker. The kidnapper has since been sentenced to 55 to 70 years in prison.

First identifiers are out in the community and interacting with the public every day. They enter people’s homes, go into warehouses, inspect hotels and restaurants, visit homeless shelters, and enter farms and ranches. They have access and are welcomed into places that most law enforcement personnel will never go and might never even know exist. This level of access makes it helpful for all first identifiers to be properly trained on how to spot indicators of human trafficking and how to report it.

THE EMERGING ROLE OF UTILITY WORKERS AND OTHER FIRST IDENTIFIERS

Properly training the people who are likely to interact with potential victims—utility workers, hospitality workers and drivers for ride services such as Uber and Lyft—is leading to results: More victims are being identified.

Understanding the unique and valuable position utility workers hold, human trafficking task forces across the nation are adding representatives from this community into the collective. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has acknowledged the role that gas and utility professionals can play in combatting trafficking. And the U.S. Office of Justice Programs’ Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center recently

forms the basis of longer-term ‘spin-off’ investigations. Proactive case leads also often arise from red-flag trainings, street outreach, task force relationships and partnerships. It all works in concert—bringing public awareness of human trafficking and doing direct outreach to stakeholders, such as utility workers, hotel employees, emergency room staff, school personnel, and others, can help build cases for law enforcement.”

State attorneys general are also looking to utility professionals for assistance. The Missouri Attorney General’s Business Council Against Human Trafficking focuses on engaging Missouri businesses in the fight by increasing the availability of training to the hospitality industry, the transportation industry and utility workers. Internationally, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council of Belize has begun implementing training for utility staff under its 2016 Action Plan.

FIRST IDENTIFIER HUMAN TRAFFICKING RED FLAGS

All first identifiers should have basic human trafficking awareness training. This training need not be cumbersome and legally complex. The employee should leave the training with the ability to identify the potential signs of the type and kind of human trafficking he or she is likely to encounter and have the knowledge and ability to properly report it to law enforcement. While “red flag” checklists of potential reportable activity are good reminders for personnel working in the field, the employee needs to also have the rudimentary informational background in which to accurately apply these tools.

According to the office of Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette, human trafficking victims often exhibit or live with one or more of the following:

- Mattresses are placed on the floor as opposed to beds;
- There is a lack of personal space or too many people sharing the living space;
- Victims often have no, or few, personal possessions;
- Rooms are sparse, with little furniture;
- Victims frequently have no identifying documents, such as a driver’s license or passport. They may not even know their address, or they may be described as “just visiting”;
- There is unusual security throughout the living space, such as barred/locked windows, locked doors, covert video security or even guards;
- Victims may exhibit signs of physical abuse, such as bruises, cuts, burns, scars, prolonged lack of health care or malnourishment;

- Victims often avoid any eye contact with responders;
- Victims commonly are accompanied by their trafficker, who will speak for them, not let them out of his or her sight, and control interactions with responders;
- Victims' stories are often inconsistent and/or lacking in significant details.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE

First identifiers such as utility professionals are uniquely positioned to make a significant impact in the identification and reporting of potential cases of human trafficking. Our homes and businesses are their places of work. An implicit component of this social contract of trust is that we must give them the skills and tools to be successful. While they hold the keys to society's critical infrastructure, they may unknowingly also hold the keys to someone's freedom.

Benjamin Thomas Greer is a former special deputy attorney general in the California Department of Justice Office of the Attorney General, where he was a lead member of the California Attorney General's Human Trafficking Special Projects Team and co-chaired the Attorney General's Human Trafficking Statewide Working Group. He is also a founder of the Human Trafficking Investigations & Training Institute. Greg H. Bristol is a retired FBI special agent who specialized in human trafficking investigations in the District of Columbia and Virginia. He is a founder and president of the Human Trafficking Investigations & Training Institute.