

Dragonfly Home in Oklahoma City helps victims of human trafficking

By Josh Dulaney Staff Writer jdulaney@oklahoman.com • Published: December 25, 2016 12:00 AM CDT • Updated: December 25, 2016 12:00 AM CDT



Whitney Anderson is executive director of the Dragonfly Home Human Trafficking Relief and Restoration Center in Oklahoma City, a state-certified center that provides services to victims and survivors. [Photo by Paul Hellstern, The Oklahoman]

Some are runaways who fell prey to hustlers. Many chose prostitution and slipped into a web of violence and addiction. Others were toddlers when they were first sold for sex.

They all share one thing in common now. Nothing.

“One rule for the game that pimps follow is that you leave with nothing,” said Whitney Anderson, co-founder and executive director of the Dragonfly Home Human Trafficking Relief and Restoration Center. “That’s what we’ve seen as service providers. They come in with typically nothing.”

Anderson and her team have 20 years of combined experience working with human trafficking survivors. On Nov. 23, the nonprofit became the first state-certified human trafficking crisis and restoration center, when the

Oklahoma attorney general's office gave its stamp of approval.

Since then, Dragonfly has received dozens of calls, provided emergency transportation for victims and taken in several survivors seeking to leave the illicit trade.

Because of underreporting, human trafficking statistics are hard to come by.

In 2015, the National Human Trafficking Resource Center received 5,973 reports of potential human trafficking cases, including 1,600 from trafficking survivors, a 24 percent increase over 2014.

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January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. Below are local, state and national resources to call for help and information.

The Dragonfly Home

www.thedragonflyhome.org

405-212-3377

Oklahoma Attorney General's Office/Victim Services Unit

24-hour Safeline: 1-800-522-SAFE (7233)

From Jan. 1, 2013 to Sept. 30, 2016, the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics Human Trafficking Unit reported that 26 defendants were charged for human trafficking, 35 adult victims of human trafficking were recovered and referred to service providers, and 21 juvenile victims were recovered and referred to the Department of Human Services. The numbers don't reflect arrests and recoveries of other agencies throughout the state.

Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous
Drugs Control/Human Trafficking Unit

Toll free hotline (855) 617-2288

Polaris Project

www.polarisproject.org

National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-
7888

In 2013, the Oklahoma City Police Department started logging the number of human trafficking arrests. That year there were eight. Over the next two years there would be 15 more. By the second week of December this year, Oklahoma City police had made 10 human trafficking arrests.

In January, a collaborative group of law enforcement, nongovernmental organizations and service providers expect to release comprehensive statistics on Oklahoma victims of human trafficking, according to OBN.

Moved by the stories of suffering, Anderson left her corporate world job as a marketing representative to join efforts against human trafficking.

“There is a lot of familial trafficking.” Anderson said. “Mothers and fathers selling their children for different reasons. Selling them to local child molesters so they can support their heroin addiction. Or gang affiliations, where the woman is sold, kind of as a prize for gang members who carry out duties as a gang member. We know that traffickers don't have a face. Victims don't have a face. It does happen across all demographics, across all socioeconomic and races.”

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Modern-day slavery

Those who combat human trafficking say the public often confuses the criminal practice with smuggling, which conjures images of women and children shuttled across state lines, or in and out of the country. Human trafficking may include smuggling, but law enforcement officials say it's broader in scope.

“Our standard is exploitation, by force, fraud or coercion, of vulnerable people, for forced labor, domestic servitude or commercial sex,” said Blaine Phillips, an agent with the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics, Human Trafficking Unit. “Basically, it's just the term for modern-day slavery. Any scheme or plan to exploit someone to make money. In Oklahoma, what we see is labor trafficking and sex trafficking.”

Labor trafficking often plays out in Oklahoma when an immigrant is brought here and has their identifying paperwork taken away by a criminal who then exploits him for work.

“A lot of them come here and have people hold onto their paperwork and their visas, and they say ‘you're going to work for me now,’ and they don't know their rights,” said Master Sgt. Gary Knight of the Oklahoma City Police Department. “The person doesn't realize they have rights and can do something, so they feel trapped.”

Victims of sex trafficking are most commonly women who entered prostitution at a young age. Phillips said the average age of new prostitutes is between 12 and 14 years old.

“The story is pretty universal that they were brought into it when they were a teenager,” he said. “It doesn't require any movement at all. Even by our statutes, somebody can be a resident of Lawton, a pimp can start working her, and she doesn't have to leave Lawton.”

Trauma-bonding

Anti-human trafficking experts spend much time dispelling stereotypes promulgated by movies and TV about how people become trapped in the trade. Most victims aren't snatched from the street by strangers.

Anderson said a consistent pattern is that of young women from abusive homes either running away, or connecting with a predator online.

“We see situations where the trafficker basically ‘boyfriends’ her and she falls in love with him,” Anderson said. “So there's this trauma-bonding. The situation is where there is intermittent conditioning. These traffickers are very strategic. One day it's ‘I'll make sure your nails and hair are done. Or we can go out shopping for a purse.’ And then the next day the woman will have to earn double to cover that, so she's essentially not making anything. We see situations where they have to make quotas. It's very common, they have to make \$1,500 a night or \$700 a night, and if they don't make that, they're not going to have a meal. They're not going to get shelter. They're going to get their (expletive) beat.”

Another stereotype is that of the victim shackled in a dark room, unable to escape. More common is victims suffering psychological trauma and verbal abuse, which keep them paired with their trafficker.

It's not easy to leave. Victims risk physical harm. So do their families.

“It's very similar to a domestic violence situation, and for years we've said ‘why doesn't she leave domestic violence?’” Anderson said. “And now we know it's way more complex than just leaving. We've seen traffickers who say ‘if you leave me, I'm going to kill your children, or I'm going to kill you. I will track you down and I will find you.’ We've seen blackmail, so women are videotaped when gang-raped, and they say ‘I'm going to show it to your entire social media base, or your church.’ Those things are extremely effective, more effective than sometimes just being physically bound.”

Traffickers generally trade in weapons, narcotics and people. If a woman escapes, so do a trafficker's profits.

“There's a perception that a lot of these girls end up dead,” Knight said. “That really doesn't happen. If a person is dealing in arms, and they sell a few rifles, that money and gun is gone forever, the same with drugs. With a girl, he sells her over and over and over again, sometimes each day. It's very lucrative compared to other types of trafficking. You can make more money in narcotics or weapons, but you can't resell them.”

Human trafficking highways?

In the Sooner State, human trafficking can happen from the Panhandle to Broken Bow. One question is how much the interstate system plays a part.

“As this has begun, we've kind of all learned together,” said Lesley March, state assistant attorney general and chief of the Victim Services Unit. “Is it because of I-40 and I-35, that's the bigger question. We don't know that it's the only factor. The jury is still out because so much of this is new.”

Phillips said because human trafficking unfolds in far corners of the state and rural environments as well as bigger cities, the interstate system may be only a small part of the problem. There are other telltale signs of the crime.

“If there's a casino, there's prostitution,” he said. “If there's prostitution, there's human trafficking.”

Hiding from help

Dragonfly provides case management and nonresidential services for those leaving the world of human trafficking. Services include advocacy, life skills training, legal referrals, food, clothing and medical referrals.

March said while there are programs in the state with shelters, Dragonfly is the first of its kind because it is a crisis center, and a restoration center. Dragonfly staff underwent extensive training and the nonprofit was evaluated for its programs, adherence to safety and confidentiality, and ability to properly assess and address trauma. Anderson asked that the location of the facility be kept confidential for security reasons.

There is a growing need for centers such as Dragonfly, March said.

“But along with the need comes the requirement that we want the services to be certified, to provide the continuity of care, that shared philosophy,” she said.

Dragonfly has a 24-hour hotline and website, but there remains a challenge to reach human trafficking victims while maintaining confidentiality. Many victims are skeptical of the help offered. They fear being returned to abusive families.

“It's very difficult for us to locate these girls and do anything about it because they don't want to be sent back to a situation of molestation and physical abuse,” Knight said. “They don't want to go back to that situation and that makes it hard for us to help. They view our help as not help at all.”

Sometimes older prostitutes will tip police to human trafficking of young girls. For example, they might notify authorities of operations run out of a motel. Dragonfly receives referrals from law enforcement, medical professionals and those working in social services.

“We also get referrals from victims that we've served,” Anderson said. “So that's the biggest compliment to us, that a victim of trafficking, a survivor, would refer people that she knows that need help as well.”

Survivors of human trafficking are in crisis mode when they seek help. Accustomed to being moved from block to block and city to city at a moment's notice, running in fear of the police and submitting to orders from criminals, they have little power over their lives.

Dragonfly seeks to bring survivors out of crisis and into stability. The staff aims to expand its services by opening a residential center in the next couple of years.

“People are noticing this is not a population that's an afterthought,” Anderson said. “They need their own type of service care.”

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