

Editorial
June 10, 2004
Tampa Tribune

Stop Modern-Day Slavery By Telling The Truth About It

The international gang's pitch goes something like this: We promise you a job and a place to live in the United States. We'll pay your way there and you'll find waiting for you a comfortable new life. But what do these men, women and, too often, children receive for this promise?

Enslavement. They are forced into prostitution or indentured servitude. They can't escape until they repay the cost of their passage here.

Human trafficking by dangerous international criminals is a problem that barely registers on the public radar. That sad fact must be remedied.

The best way to defeat the enslavers here is to spread the truth: Under U.S. law, aliens being exploited and coerced to work have the right to safety, privacy and medical assistance. They will not be charged with prostitution. They will not be deported.

But these modern-day slaves don't know the law, and they need advocates to help them.

Which is why the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has launched a program designed to identify the victims and educate those most likely to come into contact with them - vice officers, pastors, nonprofit workers, farmers, emergency room attendants and even those men who frequent "gentlemen's clubs."

On Wednesday the department rolled out its educational campaign - Rescue and Restore - in Tampa.

"We believe there is a high number of victims in the Tampa area," said Wade Horn, an assistant secretary in the department. Given the geography of Florida and the high number of illegal aliens living here or passing through, the state is a tempting setting for criminals making billions from human exploitation, he said.

Worldwide profits in **sex trafficking** alone are estimated at \$7 billion annually, according to a 2003 Florida State University study. Florida is one of the top three states to receive most of the women and children trafficked into the country, the study says.

But in the three years since Congress passed the **Trafficking** Victims Protection Act and despite a \$10 million budget, only 500 victims have been identified and received the benefits entitled them under the law.

Off To A Good Start

The new program's success will be easily measured, Horn said, by the number of victims identified and given protection.

The program is off to a good start. U.S. Attorney Paul Perez has announced that a seminar for local and state law enforcement and nonprofit agency workers will be held later this month to teach them how to identify and help victims of **human trafficking**.

Meanwhile, the rest of us can help by being alert for children who aren't going to school and young women who seem afraid to talk. Pay attention to odd behavior and report it.

In many parts of the world, the rich get away with owning the less fortunate. It can happen here only if, in our ignorance or indifference, we look away.