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The Next Big Thing

By Eric Snyder, ISPA President



In law enforcement, we seem to always be behind the curve when it comes to training. We are always trying to catch up to the newest ways criminals commit crimes. Sometimes it's a new way to do an old crime, and sometimes it's a new crime altogether. With the technological age upon us, these changes come faster than ever. So what is the "next big thing" and how can we catch up quickly?

If I use the term you're used to seeing, you'll probably stop reading. It's a term that I heard countless times before I was forced to sit through a presentation at a conference. I didn't know what it was or why it mattered to me. I had a general idea but didn't think there was anything I could do. That presentation changed my perspective. I regretted passing over this topic for so long.

So what am I referring to? Try these titles on for size: Forced Prostitution, Forced Labor, Modern-Day Slavery.... The trade of people, against their will or without their consent. The topic I am referring to is human trafficking.

"Human trafficking" is a legal term — you won't hear people involved in this life say those words. It's a crime where vulnerable young boys and girls are taken away from home and forced to do unspeakable sexual acts. It's a crime where people are forced to do labor for little or no pay. Whether through force or coercion, thousands of people are affected by this crime every year. You've seen them but had no idea....

In law enforcement, we are sometimes slow to adjust because we just can't open our minds to believe that these horrible things could happen near us. Other times we need to see evidence of the problem before we can justify spending our time and resources on it. Well I'm here to tell you that this is happening — and it is happening in your communities!

I recently attended an executive briefing on the human trafficking problem in Iowa. I must preface this story by saying that I had considered myself "aware" of the problem. Boy was I wrong! Tina Frundt, founder of Courtney's House and a human trafficking survivor, spoke to a group about how we must change the way we approach this problem. It's unlike other problems we've faced. In fact, many "traffickers" choose this crime because they know that law enforcement is ill prepared to deal with it, making them less likely to get caught.

Ms. Frundt presented some very surprising information that she and her team were able to find through simple internet searches. After being in Iowa for mere hours, Tina's team was able to identify several locations that were probable human trafficking sites right in our own backyards. We didn't see them because we aren't looking, or those who are looking aren't empowered to do anything about it.

I used to think that human trafficking was only a problem in major cities, or near major event sites. After listening to Ms. Frundt, I realized that Iowa is no less vulnerable than anywhere else. We have two major interstates that intersect in the center of our state. The traffickers must travel between cities and events, and they don't stop making money while they travel. The demand is everywhere so trafficking will take place everywhere. Traffickers also recruit as they travel so even if they aren't operating in your city, they may very well find a new victim in your city as they operate nearby.

Human trafficking is "the next big thing" in law enforcement training. It has to be. Thousands of helpless victims will continue to be exploited until we find a way to save them. It takes place in big cities and small towns so none of us can sit this one out. Educate yourself about the crime. Find a training to attend to learn about the lifestyle. Talk to people in your agency about what resources are available to handle this problem. We can't afford to wait any longer. It is time to catch up.