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Abstract

The hidden nature of the horrendous crime of trafficking in persons makes it difficult to accurately determine the extent of the problem, both nationally and locally. Additionally, the complexities, time consuming investigations, resource and jurisdictional challenges, issues with traumatized victims who are often reluctant to identify, and/or testify against the traffickers, all result in low levels of prosecution. Any successful outcome of these difficult cases mandates the strong communication and collaboration of all agencies involved, including law enforcement, prosecution, and a variety of victim's services. This paper presents one relatively successful task force model.

Introduction

Most of us who have worked in the anti-trafficking movement for any length of time have heard the horrific stories of the survivors of sexual trafficking. These victims, whether domestic or foreign and whether adults or minors, stir our passions and emotions to action. In 1999, at a Congressional hearing on human trafficking and prior to the passage of the Trafficking in Victims Protection Act (TVPA), legislators were educated about the horror of trafficking in human beings through the testimony of practitioners and rescued victims. Victims testified about the terror and brutality they endured as modern day slaves. As a result of these testimonies, members of Congress requested data related to the scope of human trafficking in the U.S. The data presented to them was provided by the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency. This data estimated that there were as many as 50,000 modern day slaves trafficked in the United States every year and 700,000 victims trafficked globally each year. The United States Congress, after hearing such conscience-shocking testimony from victims, passed the landmark Trafficking in Victims Protection Act of 2000. This Act created strong anti-trafficking laws and has aided in approving millions of dollars for both domestic and international anti-trafficking efforts. Many countries around the globe have also passed strong anti-trafficking laws and have mobilized major anti-trafficking efforts to investigate, prosecute victimizers, and rescue and restore victims who are in need of a multitude of services. Unfortunately, many of these efforts have proven to be less than successful and a great deal of money, as well-intentioned as it is, has been wasted because the effort was not based on sound policy, research, or analysis (McGaha & Evans, 2009).

This paper provides an overview of the current situation in human trafficking as it affects Southwest Florida. The prevalence of human trafficking in our region demonstrates the importance of a collaborative approach to battle this issue. Our analysis begins with a discussion of the difficulties in identifying victims, investigating suspected cases of human trafficking, and prosecuting offenders. These difficulties stem from a pervasive lack of coordination. The remainder of the paper focuses on the requirements of effective efforts against human trafficking. To that end, the Southwest Florida Regional Human Trafficking Task Force was implemented to engender true collaboration. The multi-disciplinary team approach has provided avenues of support between law enforcement, prosecutors, medical care providers, mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, and other experienced professionals. This model has been effective in bringing together a team of dedicated individuals to fight against human trafficking.

The Hidden Crime of Trafficking: Difficulties in Identifying Victims

Because human trafficking is such a hidden and complex crime, we really do not know the extent of the victims, either in the United States or globally. Changes in victim population estimates have occurred over the years, and have been attributed to improved methodology. However, the accuracy of these changes cannot be verified using current data (Gozdziak & Collett, 2005). The majority of data on human trafficking comes from secondary sources, such as law enforcement or victim's services agencies, making it difficult to accurately count the number of victims locally, regionally, or nationally. This lack of primary data limits the ability of researchers to estimate the number of trafficked persons accurately.

A major methodological issue regarding the accurate estimate of trafficking victims is the lack of consistency in operational definitions of human trafficking. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons defined trafficking in persons as using any means to gain power or payment through the exploitation of an individual (Gozdziak & Collett, 2005). It is difficult to determine whether a victim meets the criteria listed in the U.N. Protocol definition simply through secondary sources. In order to accurately determine whether an individual has been trafficked, more detailed interviews or surveys may be necessary.

In addition, much of the research currently devoted to human trafficking focuses on women and children trafficked for sex. This disparity is also present in the prosecution of traffickers, where the vast majority of cases involve sexual exploitation (Farrell, Owens, & McDevitt, 2014). Zhang (2012) compiled research showing that labor trafficking is likely more prevalent than sex trafficking. Any comprehensive attempt to quantify the number of trafficked individuals should include victims of both labor and sex trafficking.

Defining human trafficking for use with empirical research is further hampered by the same difficulties that currently exist in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of human trafficking. According to Farrell, et al. (2014), the majority of trafficking cases are found through reactive means, such as tips and victim self-identification. There is little support for specialized law enforcement dedicated to investigating human trafficking. Many suspects of human trafficking are not charged with offenses related to human trafficking, and instead are charged with lower-level offenses. This makes it difficult to account for all cases of human trafficking within a jurisdiction.

The hidden nature of the population of trafficked victims is another methodological issue which is not easily overcome. A hidden population is defined as a population with no sampling frame. In other words, the size and boundary of the population is unknown, and therefore traditional survey techniques are

unreliable. Hidden populations also have strong privacy concerns. In the case of human trafficking victims, they are often stigmatized by others. Victims, while initially cooperating with authorities, may become unwilling to participate in an investigation. The lack of cooperation by identified victims of human trafficking is another obstacle experienced in investigations, which is mirrored in academic research.

There are several methodologies which have been proposed or implemented to assist in the quantitative analysis of human trafficking. Many of these methodologies are based on snowball sampling, where several initial contacts in the population are interviewed and asked to provide names of other individuals who might also participate in the study. These individuals are approached by the researchers, and the process continues. There is a possibility that sampling bias will occur in a true snowball sample, and therefore modifications to the methodology have been proposed to correct for this bias. The main modification present in most of the models includes the use of incentives (Heckathorn, 1997). The incentives would be twofold; a primary incentive for participation, and secondary incentives when those who they refer also participate. By providing potential participants with primary incentives for their participation, the individual is more likely to participate. Secondary incentives will entice the individual to ask others to also participate in the research study.

Currently in Southwest Florida, one local task force has begun collaborative work between law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and victim's services providers. These agencies and organizations are tasked with the successful identification, investigation, and prosecution of human trafficking cases. This collaboration has generated more accurate and useful data regarding the prevalence of human trafficking within the Southwest Florida region. Further collaboration, through the adoption of a standardized intake form, will provide comprehensive information for each case while minimizing the potential of psychological harm to the victim.

Reliable national and international estimates of human trafficking victims are important; however, a reliable sampling frame to study human trafficking victims may not be accessible given the hidden nature of the population. Because of this, local agencies and task forces should continue to document and share all information available with other local groups. Accurate local numbers regarding the prevalence of human trafficking may serve as a much-needed catalyst toward understanding and ultimately eliminating human trafficking. While these issues continue to affect research in the field of human trafficking, victim population numbers will remain uncertain.

Difficulties in Investigation and Prosecution

What we do know for sure is that human trafficking is a greatly under-reported crime and, unlike other transnational crimes of this magnitude, can be extremely complex and time-consuming to investigate and prosecute. Human trafficking investigations consume significant amounts of time and are low-yield in terms of prosecution, which contributes to the low numbers of potential victims being reported. This often discourages investigators from spending the necessary time on human trafficking cases. More thorough investigation of such cases could potentially uncover greater numbers of victims as well as extensive criminal networks. These investigations, however, require dedicated, sustained resources. If prosecutors are not willing to accept these complex cases and provide support to law enforcement, the cases will not be given a high priority. This in turn will continue the cycle between inadequate funding for thorough investigations and a lack of successfully completed cases which display the proof that funding is needed. Prosecutors must assume leadership in trafficking cases and work closely to support law enforcement at the local and regional levels for successful prosecutions and convictions to happen. Without such collaboration and success, victims are going to be very reluctant to come forward, thus jeopardizing themselves and the anti-human trafficking movement further.

Examples of the difficulties in prosecution include required legal elements of the crime, such as coercion, as well as the burden of proof. Sometimes it is only the victim's perception that determines whether the critical coercion threshold of this element has been met. This includes developing what is referred to as "climate of fear" evidence and which can only be done with the close cooperation of the victims. Gaining victims' cooperation, in turn, demands that they receive security, protection, support, and services, as well as other incentives for cooperation. It is imperative to the case that any successful prosecution requires strong collaboration in the provisions of victims' services, witness protection, restitution, and programs for re-introducing survivors successfully into society. Obviously, these resource-intensive cases that go far beyond what other crimes require can present serious resource and jurisdictional challenges. Additionally, the relevant events in trafficking cases can span many years, requiring a considerable commitment of investigatory and prosecutorial resources, and the global issue of many of these cases may cause local authorities to consider such cases as being beyond their mandate. All of these complexities must be addressed for successful disposition of human trafficking cases. Adding to these complexities is the issue of trying to work with uncooperative trafficked minors who may continue to conduct themselves under the influence of their traffickers or who are not interested in helping law enforcement in any way. Often they are called "status offenders"; in the USA, that

includes chronic running away from facilities. This makes protection and security very difficult. Because this is a hidden or clandestine crime in which victim testimony is crucial to successful prosecution, victims, whether adult or minors, are often reluctant to cooperate with prosecution because of trauma, shame, fear, loyalty, and distrust (McGaha and Evans, 2009).

All of these subtle, yet not so subtle and complex psychological dynamics require strong collaboration between law enforcement and victim's services that extend beyond those needed in practically any other crime. The potential for international and/or multi-jurisdictional aspects requires collaboration and cooperation between state and local authorities and their federal partners that is likewise unprecedented (Finckenauer & Min Liu, 2008).

The Problem: Lack of Systematic Coordination among Agencies

Regardless of the lack of reliability in the estimates and the issues regarding effective investigation and prosecution, law enforcement and prosecutors need to understand that victims of human trafficking are not like other victims of crime. They may not view themselves as victims, and in many cases they may have chosen to enter the country voluntarily but illegally (smuggled), only to then be forced into labor and/or sex trafficking. There are other issues that make investigations complex, including victims' immigration status, cultural diversity and language barriers, severity of the repeated trauma (physical, sexual, and/or psychological) experienced, and lack of trust and fear of law enforcement. These are just a few of the issues that are often cited as challenges to law enforcement and why they need be able to distinguish trafficking victims from other victims of crime. These characteristics or conditions place victims of human trafficking outside the comfort zone of many "street cops." Many of the other kinds of task forces, including gang, terrorism, and vice, etc., are not accustomed to dealing directly with victims. This creates a greater need for training and collaboration with victims' services providers, immigrant service providers, legal advocates, and NGO's (Finckenauer, 2009).

To add to these difficulties, because victims are often apprehensive when working with law enforcement, a majority of investigators and line officers find communicating with victims very difficult. Over three-fourths (78%) surveyed reported communication with victims to be challenging. Almost half the respondents reported victims as being uncooperative or only minimally cooperative. Given the importance of obtaining information from victims to build a case against the traffickers, these findings suggest the need for extensive training for law enforcement (particularly line officers) regarding working with victims. This is why the obvious need for collaboration with victims' services providers and

related NGO's is essential in assisting law enforcement to establish a rapport with victims, many of whom already have a great fear of the authorities, fear of deportation, fear of retaliation against self or family, and lack of overall trust in the justice system (McGaha and Evans, 2009).

Often when we go to major conferences on human trafficking, particularly those sponsored by the Department of Justice, we hear of the success stories of major prosecution cases where the FBI or ICE, working in conjunction with local law enforcement and prosecutors with the support of some NGO's, have achieved results of long term convictions of sex traffickers. Unfortunately, those cases are the exception, not the rule. More often than not, cases cannot be successfully prosecuted and traffickers are freed, convicted of lesser charges, or deported. In such cases, foreign victims are left at the mercy of the local immigration officials and often also deported back to their home countries. These cases are extremely difficult to prosecute unless victims are secure, are receiving proper services by NGO victims' services, and the police are working closely together with prosecutors and other interested parties.

One of the major lessons learned from law enforcement officers who have worked on trafficking cases is that they have to look beneath the surface and recognize the fact that this work requires a lot of patience and time. Investigating these cases is not a quick process, and encouragement from prosecutors as well as assistance with victims who desperately require a lot of complex services in order to be stabilized, is essential. None of this can be accomplished in a vacuum. If we are ever to combat this crime, law enforcement needs to marshal the help of the entire community to identify and investigate victims. This requires a tremendous amount of community awareness effort and agency responder training. Local police officers are familiar with traditional crimes like prostitution, but human trafficking requires officers to look through a different filter at a situation they once thought they understood. It has been a truly eye-opening experience for them to realize that someone they once viewed as a criminal might be a victim of a very serious crime.

Collaboration Defined

As mentioned, there is a widespread need for collaboration among prosecutors, local law enforcement, and federal investigators at all levels. Investigators and prosecutors must work more cooperatively with others in the law enforcement and victims' services (public and private) community. Collaboration is essential, and polarization of law enforcement and victims' services is very damaging and counter-productive. Early involvement of prosecutors in these cases appears to be critical from a law enforcement perspective. These are complex and

tough cases, and without the strong support and involvement of prosecutors and police, there is much less motivation to devote needed resources. Providing solid victims' services by providers who are working collaboratively with law enforcement and prosecution is also critical. Victims need emergency and long-term care that is essential during the lengthy prosecution of these cases.

Simply putting people and agencies under one roof that have somewhat similar interests does not usually lead to success. Collaboration is not always easy to achieve and/or maintain, but it is essential to the successful outcome of these extremely complex cases. The term is often overused and commonly misinterpreted or mistaken for other interactions such as networking (exchanging information), coordination (accommodating the needs of another to enhance communication), and cooperation (sharing of resources, staff, resources etc). While these all are forms of working together, they are not the same as collaboration. A working definition of collaboration could be the joining together to make possible that which cannot be accomplished alone. Collaboration allows partners to reach an aspiration that would be impossible to achieve without each member of the team working toward the same end. It requires the partnership and the commitment of all members working toward a common goal to succeed. (Larson & LaFasto, 1989)

Community-based collaboration is the process by which citizens, agencies, organizations, and businesses make formal, sustained, commitments to work together to accomplish a shared vision, often with an allocation of human, physical and financial resources. When communities do not develop a pattern of collaboration, they diminish community development potential. Without collaboration, there is often a lack of direction, win-lose behaviors, lack of commitment, and poor planning, all resulting in negative effects within the community.

The problems we often face on human trafficking/sex slavery cases are not reflections of a lack of knowledge or skill; the entities, NGO's victims' services, law enforcement, and prosecutors are usually very skilled and passionate in their respective venues. The real issue is how to identify the resources in a community and/or region that can best provide the services and/or assets that are needed; even when we do know what their potential is, we have difficulty marshaling them in an effective way.

On the other hand, the victims' advocates are mainly interested in the protection and restoration of the victims, including dealing with very complex issues involving trauma, immigration (in the case of foreign victims), medical care, clothing, and shelter. Too often, the victims' advocates or NGO's sometimes have their own distrust of authority/police abuse of their victims and do not fully cooperate, while law enforcement feels that the victims' advocates do not fully

cooperate with law enforcement while also criticizing the prosecutors for not cooperating in accepting their cases.

True collaboration means understanding each other's roles, while minimizing turf issues and egos and realizing that pursuing trafficking investigations and prosecution needs the support of state, local and federal law enforcement, victims' services agencies, and related NGO's to stabilize the victims so that they can assist in the prosecutions. The United States Department of Justice ("DOJ") developed and funded a "task force" approach to encourage collaboration. The majority of funds were awarded to local law enforcement agencies to run and operate the anti-trafficking forces. As with many federal grants, however, when the grant funds ended many of the task force initiatives dissolved.

The Southwest Florida Regional Task Force Model

We have found that when sponsorship of the Southwest Florida Regional Human Trafficking Task Force (HTTF) is coordinated through the effort of the U.S. Attorney's Office, both law enforcement and victim's services agencies tend to give it more credibility. Additionally, attendance is greater than individually-funded one agency task forces who had minimal attendance and coordination. The HTTF meetings are under the umbrella of and chaired by the U.S. Attorney's Office and are attended by 30-50 participants. The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida is dedicated to protecting trafficking victims from exploitation and abuse. Internet predators, child pornographers, and individuals who recruit and coerce human beings into prostitution in our cities or who travel abroad to sexually abuse foreign children shatter lives and rob youth of their innocence. This office is committed to aggressively prosecuting offenders who abuse and exploit individuals for labor and/or sex trafficking.

The HTTF procedure for human trafficking cases uses a collaborative team effort to bring each case from start to finish. Victims are identified through reports from local service agencies or private individuals. These reports are taken by individuals at local police departments and sheriff's offices tasked with human trafficking investigations. Law enforcement will then contact the designated Assistant U.S. Attorney (AUSA) regarding the identified victim or victims. The AUSA, in turn, notifies all appropriate local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, who then coordinate investigation procedures. The AUSA also contacts the Human Trafficking Resource Center at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). The coordinator at the Center assesses the needs of each case and coordinates with other community and faith-based service providers to ensure each victim has access to food, shelter, immigration services, and educational/vocational training as needed.

This team effort has helped those tasked with investigating human trafficking to identify gaps in the investigation process. One of the main services that the task force investigation team asked for was a professional victim's assessment at the initial investigative contact, whether the victim be domestic or foreign, minor or adult. In many cases, law enforcement investigators, even the best trained, are not equipped to quickly and professionally assess the level of the victim's trauma and/or situation, often resulting in creating further distrust of authorities. Obviously, without the full cooperation and protection of the victim, there can be no case. This gap in services led to the loss of several cases. As a result, a Forensic Interview Team (FIT) concept was developed and is now being implemented.

The purpose of the FIT model is to implement trained mental health professionals to interview potential or suspected victims of human trafficking for the purpose of assisting law enforcement and prosecutors with human trafficking cases. This model was developed by Dr. Amanda Evans, co-director of the Human Trafficking Resource Center at Florida Gulf Coast University in conjunction with the Lee County Sheriff with funding by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to assist law enforcement in efforts to appropriately interview suspected human trafficking victims from a trauma-informed perspective. Dr. Evans developed the model based in part on recommendations from the World Health Organization and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, as well as advances in neuroscience.

A gap in both the investigative and victim centered approach to human trafficking is evident at the interview phase of discovery. Extensive discussions with the law enforcement officers directly involved in these investigations reveals a concern related to the outcomes of interviews with suspected victims. The emotional and psychological well-being of the victim is not always addressed during law enforcement interviews. The law enforcement officers who are most knowledgeable in these cases state that they feel a more specialized approach to interviewing would greatly benefit all involved. The FIT model addresses this issue by allowing professional mental health practitioners to lead victim interviews. This gap is not unique to Lee County and has been identified as a concern in related literature (Clawson, Small, Go, & Myles, 2003; Hodge & Lietz, 2007).

Successful cases require not only specially trained investigators, legal services, and short and long term victims' support and services, but a true team approach and not just coordination or communication. Prosecutors, victims' services providers (NGO's), and federal, state, and local law enforcement should establish formalized channels of consistent communication rather than relying on traditional, informal, and reactive solicitation of information. Attention should be given to institutionalizing inter-agency agreements and relationships for training

and cross-training resources and information sharing. Turf issues and individual egos are destructive and cannot be tolerated in a collaborative system. Successful task forces identify training at all levels; police, prosecution, counselors, victims' services, NGO's, etc. are essential to the collaboration needed to have a successful case. Task force members repeatedly cited the need for open-mindedness, frank discussion, and patience. This is a process (building partnerships) that takes time and risk. Each side has to "bend a little" to end up best serving the client.

Given the difficulties reported by many state and local law enforcement respondents the author has communicated with regularly regarding working with victims (lack of trust, lack of cooperation, difficulty communicating, etc.), it is important for law enforcement to receive training from local victims' services providers and NGO's on how to interact with victims of human trafficking (e.g. their experiences and the impact of trauma on their behavior). The development and dissemination of formal protocols and written policies, practices, and procedures allows agencies to begin to learn the boundaries of their work and the work of others. Further, this collaboration will minimize overlap and duplication of services.

Essential Ingredients of Building True Collaboration

The successful collaboration of any group requires more than the establishment of protocols and policies. Larson and Lafasto (1989) identified characteristics shared by highly effective teams. To be truly effective, all members of the team must share a clear goal and vision. To combat human trafficking, this involves four key components: to arrest the traffickers, to prosecute the traffickers and remove them from society, to prevent trafficking, and to rescue and restore the victims. Often the entities involved in trafficking work at cross purposes to the vision. The main interest is to build an investigative case against the traffickers that will be accepted by prosecuting attorneys, whether at the federal level or the state level, depending on the charge. In some cases they do not use the trafficking laws at all, but instead use RICO, as it is easier to prove at the state level and the sentences may be just as severe. However, when this occurs, the statistics do not reflect a trafficking prosecution.

A second component to effective collaboration includes a results-driven structure. The importance and success of a formal structure, such as a task force, is on whether or not it is appropriate for the achievement of the performance objectives. To be successful, a team's structure should be designed around the results to be achieved. The team must have the right assets, agencies, and personnel in place, including law enforcement (local, state, federal); prosecution (state and federal); and a primary victim's services coordinator or team (one for adults and

one for children) with said support specialists on hand to meet the needs of individuals, whether foreign nationals or domestic. Minors present very special situations and problems in dealing with other jurisdictional issues, such as the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Strong and principled leadership is another foundation required of effective collaboration. Effective leadership can make or break any collaborative endeavor. Effective leaders draw together the team's vision; a belief in the opportunity for change and the ability to meaningfully involve others. Another important component to the collaborative approach is strong discipline. The team must have the will to stick to the task and not degenerate into a social club. Finally, there must be open lines of communication so that everyone on the team can provide meaningful input to others.

A collaborative climate is most commonly described in the old adage "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Teams operating in a truly collaborative climate work well together, and trust is a major benefit. Trust is produced in a climate that includes three elements: honesty (integrity and truthfulness), consistency (predictable behavior and responses), and respect (treating people with dignity and fairness).

In any group, there are obstacles that may create friction or cause dissention within the group. The natural barriers to be faced and overcome in building such a true collaborative task force include personnel issues, such as staff turnover in key positions, turf issues or egos, or a lack of leadership. A lack of identified goals and measureable objectives is a second area of concern, and must be addressed to maintain group cohesion. Finally, the group will require formal protocols when working within the group and with outside agencies. Specifically, a human trafficking task force must have formal protocols when interacting with human trafficking victims. A victim-centered approach is necessary in order to enhance communication as well as minimize the duplication of victim interviews. In addition, formal protocols between federal, state, or local law enforcement and state and federal prosecutors is required to clarify jurisdictional issues when they arise.

Multi-Disciplinary Team Approach

A major strategy implemented by The Resource Center at Florida Gulf Coast University and used to enhance communication and coordination of specific human trafficking cases and related victims service issues is the Multi-Disciplinary Team approach. The multi-disciplinary approach to combat trafficking has been recognized on a national level to be one of the most effective methods to prevent, identify, and ultimately defeat this crime. According to the U.S. Department of

Justice (Massachusetts Interagency Human Trafficking Policy Task Force, 2013), “It is now well accepted that the best response to the challenge of child abuse and neglect investigations is the formation of an MDT.” For similar reasons, this is the most effective approach to child victims of sexual exploitation, in part because so many survivors are involved in multiple public systems (sometimes labeled “cross-over youth”) and are subject to multiple jurisdictions.

It is not unusual to observe many service provider agencies attempting to assist victims within a vacuum and to be the sole providers of all the needs of a human trafficking survivor, whether they are victims of sex or labor trafficking. This type of approach tends to lead to fractured communication between agencies and an increase in competition while at the same time decreasing collaboration between them. This typically fosters poor relations between law enforcement entities and the service providers due to the inconsistency of service provisions and the overall lack of effective communication.

This issue has plagued the Southwest Florida area for many years. The Southwest Florida Region is comprised of seven counties; Collier, Charlotte, Lee, Hendry, Glades, Desoto, and Sarasota. The geographic and demographic characteristics of these counties include miles of isolated shoreline and mangroves, acres of agricultural lands, thousands of farm laborers and other transient workers. Pair this with I-75 corridors running from Miami to north Florida, and an environment prime for human trafficking and smuggling is created, making this region ideal for traffickers of both adults and minors. There are many sections of the seven counties that are deemed to be low-income neighborhoods, serving not only as recruiting grounds for traffickers, but also as places where the crimes they perpetrate can be hidden in plain sight.

Historically, this area of Florida has been home to many federally-funded initiatives by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Department of Health and Human Services. Because of the influx of funding to combat trafficking, there are many individuals and agencies in this area that have developed a certain level of expertise regarding the crime of human trafficking. Despite this historical context, efforts in the region continued to be fractured with frequent miscommunications and clashes between agencies.

Because of this observed roadblock to effective collaboration, a service gap analysis was conducted, together with the United States Attorney’s Office Task Force (in Lee County, FL), and it was determined that a centralized neutral entity would be an effective way to attempt to unite efforts in the area. For this reason, the Human Trafficking Resource Center at Florida Gulf Coast University was initially conceived.

The mission of the center is to work toward the prevention and elimination of human trafficking and modern day slavery by providing a centralized resource

center to serve as a catalyst for public and private agencies, task forces and advocacy groups in the spirit of partnership and inclusiveness that will enhance collaboration and cooperation while engaging faculty and students in supporting and conducting research specific to the crime and related issues of trafficking in persons, both domestically and internationally.

It was the vision of the center staff that a multi-disciplinary approach could be developed and implemented by the various entities that comprised the anti-human trafficking effort of Southwest Florida, and after a great deal of cooperation and buy in by many local agencies, the first Multi-Disciplinary Team of Southwest Florida met on October 24, 2014. The purpose of the group is to provide a multi-faceted look at currently active human trafficking cases and provide solutions to the identified problems. In the spirit of maintaining with prevention, protection and prosecution, identified as the three main elements of a multi-disciplinary approach to combat trafficking (Gonzalez & Collins, 2011), the Southwest Florida MDT is comprised of local law enforcement, prosecutors, medical care providers, mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, child protective services, immigration attorneys, case management providers, and other experienced professionals. Information is shared between members in a cooperative fashion and services are made available in a collaborative manner, ensuring ease of access.

The team meets on a monthly basis and has so far been a great success in unifying efforts and services. However, the team is not by any means complete. There are still areas that are unrepresented, leading to gaps that should be addressed. There are no public officials present, federal law enforcement is not actively involved, and none of the local school boards are represented. Until leaders and representatives from all areas recognize the importance of participating in collaborative efforts, there will continue to be a problem with identifying, rescuing and assisting survivors of human trafficking. There will also continue to be a major problem regarding the prosecution and arrest of the perpetrators. It is not unusual to find within anti-trafficking movements that many case workers, clinicians, advocates, and officers have a profound interest and passion when it comes to combatting human trafficking on the ground level, yet many high level administrators offer only cursory support or none at all.

Human Trafficking Today in Southwest Florida

The Southwest Florida MDT has staffed 21 open, unduplicated cases as of September 2015 since its inception, and this number will only grow moving forward. As efforts continue to develop and evolve, it is the expectation of the center staff that the MDT will eventually include an emergency response team. The team will be able to assist law enforcement officers immediately following the

rescue of a victim to ensure rapid commencement of services, and the forensic interview team may conduct forensic assessments for both adult and minor victims, potentially strengthening cases against perpetrators. However, these efforts require not only long term sustainability, but the support of public officials, both on local and statewide levels. These efforts also require that all entities involved continue to collaborate and remain committed to the fight against human trafficking.

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