

Local Jewish women's group takes up fight against sex trafficking

Mike Isaacs

misaacs@pioneerlocal.com | @SKReview_Mike

Oct. 21 5:52 p.m.

RELATED ARTICLES

Play in Skokie uncovers darkness that surrounds sex trafficking

Oct. 21 5:55 p.m.

SKOKIE — When many people hear those dark, awful stories about young girls and women forced into the sex trafficking trade, they find it hard to believe that something so heinous can be happening in today's world — even if it's usually a world away.

What they may not know is that the pervasive and deeply troubling occurrences of females enslaved as a commodity for sex are not relegated to any distant society; sex trafficking is a global problem, yes, but abuses happen every day in their own backyards.

That's just one of the messages that the National Council of Jewish Women want people to know about sex trafficking. This isn't just a problem on the other side of the globe or far away in this country or even just on the seedier sides of Chicago. It extends everywhere including the suburbs.

In the Chicago area alone, the National Council of Jewish Women reports, 16,000 to 25,000 local women are "sex trafficked" every year.

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) Chicago North Shore, which is headquartered in Wilmette, recently founded J-CAST Chicago or the Jewish Coalition Against Sex Trafficking to address this brutal practice. NCJW is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action through cultural and educational programs, social action and community service projects, and advocacy. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms.

NCJW has a long history of addressing sex trafficking although it has been less active on the issue in recent years, said Stacy Saef, co-president of NCJW Chicago North Shore.

Shortly after NCJW was founded some 120 years ago, members realized that women were coming to the United States through Ellis Island under the pretenses that a suitor or husband was waiting for them.

"A lot of these women were young, some of them were girls and some of them had no contacts," Saef said.

Around the turn of the century, NCJW stationed members outside Ellis Island to protect women and to make sure they did not become victims of sex trafficking. The organization saved thousands of women and girls from sexual predators.

"The subject is certainly not new to NCJW, but we were less active for years while we were fighting other fights," Saef said.

The organization has mobilized against sex trafficking once again. Many of the NCJW national sections are now taking a more active role around the issue than they have in years.

“We’ve always been very active in domestic violence, and this is a form of domestic violence,” Saef said. “I actually call it domestic violence on steroids. It’s an abuse of an individual. It’s an abuse of women and children, and that’s right up our organization’s alley.”

New play

NCJW Chicago North Shore has helped bring a provocative new play to Skokie, “Shadowtown II: The Johns,” currently running at the Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center. After seeing Mary Bonnet’s original “Shadow Town” on the same subject, but from a different perspective, J-CAST members aligned with Bonnet to sponsor the sequel and bring it to the area. (See adjoining story).

On Oct. 26, following the 3 p.m. performance in Skokie, NCJW is hosting a private reception with the director and cast members.

Likewise, Skokie Mayor George Van Dusen is scheduled Nov. 3 to proclaim Skokie Sex Trafficking Awareness Days at the regular Skokie Village Board meeting.

“It’s an underground economy, an underground industry,” Saef said. “It has been growing for the past decade or so. It’s not just the shady looking guy at the corner of the street who is involved in it. It is practically anybody and everybody from any walk of life. Gangs are getting involved in it.”

The challenge in addressing underground sex trafficking — whether it’s in another country or on Chicagoland streets — is the incentive for overseers to make easy money and quickly.

“A drug or a gun has a shelf life of one and you’re done with it,” Saef said. “Human beings have a shelf life practically forever. They’re disposable so as soon as you’re finished with one, you pick up another one and start selling her.”

From a trafficker’s standpoint, Saef said, sex trafficking is a far more lucrative “business” than other underground criminality.

“Our goal is to raise public awareness and advocate for and on behalf of the victims of sex trafficking,” Saef said.

The coalition has been working with CAASE or Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and other organizations that are on the front lines of this fight.

“I don’t think people realize just how many people and families this impacts,” Saef said. “We on the North Shore say that sex trafficking happens overseas. Or we say that it happens in other cities. Or we say that it happens in Chicago. But the reality is that it may happen there but it also happens here. And if it’s not happening here, consumers of sex trafficking live here. The most important message to convey is that this is a problem for every one of us.”