

Human Trafficking Is On The Rise

By CHRIS ECHEGARAY The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - It was the blank stares from the children who were exploited and sold to Americans for \$15 at Tijuana, Mexico, this year.

It was the 18-month-old baby in Fort Myers with the initials of a human trafficker branded on the baby's back.

It's the helplessness of victims who are treated as merchandise that's driving the Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking campaign.

Friday, the coalition held a training session at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. It has formed a statewide task force with advocates in combating human trafficking. The training session featured Fernando Garcia-Robles, coordinator of the anti-trafficking in persons section, Organization of American States. He spoke to advocates and law enforcement about the prevalence of the people trade.

The coalition wants law enforcement and advocates to distinguish between someone who has been smuggled - where someone pays to get into the country - and a person who is a victim of human trafficking - where he or she has no choice, said its founder Anna Rodriguez.

Rodriguez was in San Diego for a human trafficking conference in January when she went with undercover officers to look into the seedy world of people peddling.

It was there she saw children being sold.

"You see with your own eyes the victims," Rodriguez told a room filled with about 50 deputies and advocates Friday. "There are kids between 6 and 17 years old."

The U.S. State Department estimates there are 2 million people in the United States who are victims of human trafficking. Rodriguez says California is on top of the list and Florida is second.

There are no official statistics, Rodriguez says, because human trafficking is a new phenomenon for law enforcement.

It's at the same stage domestic violence was many years ago - not many victims come forward and no statistics are kept.

Rodriguez says that in Florida, 14 court cases have been resolved and there are 16 cases pending. She says 49 states are dealing with human trafficking cases in court.

In Fort Myers last year, a 16-year-old who was trafficked for sex exploitation had given birth, Rodriguez said. The 18-month-old baby was branded, she said.

To shed light on the international scope of human trafficking, Garcia-Robles explained that smuggling patterns vary from country to country. He explained the vast difference between being smuggled and being trafficked.

He spoke of the illegal adoption trade in Guatemala, where many hotel lobbies have "adoption offices," selling babies for \$40,000 to \$50,000.

"We need to do something about it," Garcia-Robles said. "It could be happening here and we may not know about it."

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