

DETROIT

How authorities, advocates are combating human trafficking ahead of Detroit's NFL Draft



Sarah Rahal

The Detroit News

Published 11:45 p.m. ET April 2, 2024

Detroit — As Detroit prepares to host the NFL Draft this month, city and state officials are not only bracing for the influx of more than 400,000 anticipated visitors but also intensifying their efforts to combat what some say is a silent yet pervasive threat: human trafficking.

According to the Michigan Attorney General's Office, human trafficking, in which men, women and children are forced into prostitution, domestic servitude and other labor for little or no pay, is a large and growing criminal industry worldwide, including in Michigan. With Detroit's proximity to highways and international borders, authorities said the Motor City can be a hub for traffickers looking to exploit vulnerable people during major events, such as the North American International Auto Show and Woodward Dream Cruise.

Collaborating with local nonprofits and federal authorities, city officials are launching awareness campaigns, increasing surveillance in high-risk areas and training hotel staff and transportation workers to identify and report signs of trafficking. Advocates are hanging posters of missing children, placing "get help" stickers in women's public bathrooms and labeling bath soaps with the National Human Trafficking Hotline they will distribute to hundreds of hotels and motels ahead of the draft.

"When I get there, I'm going to be looking for men walking around with women, children and watching how they move and how they're dressed," said Leslie King, a 60-year-old survivor from Grand Rapids who is planning to travel to Detroit to help train authorities and identify victims who may need help. "The public needs to be aware that events like this bring traffickers, guaranteed, and they need to keep their eyes open. I guarantee you, you walk by

so many women and children being trafficked and because you're uneducated, you wouldn't know what to look for."

According to 2021 reports from the National Human Trafficking Hotline database, 1,186 hotline tips were received from Michigan, with 526 of the tips coming directly from victims or survivors of trafficking. But experts said the true number of victims can be hard to quantify.

"Usually, if there's a bust, we can get some information from victims. But the problem with combating human trafficking, in general, is it just lives in the shadows, and it always has, and we just never know how much of it is going on at one particular time," said Melissa Palepu, attorney specialist for human trafficking and child abuse at the Michigan Attorney General's Office and chair of the Michigan Human Trafficking Commission.

Advocates claimed that Michigan is one of the worst states in the nation for human trafficking.

Christopher Szczygiel, an FBI Detroit special agent, referenced the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that estimates that in Metro Detroit, at any given moment, approximately 300 victims are being trafficked and 30, or 10%, are children.

"Our analysts have been looking at numbers from previous NFL Drafts for comparison, and what we're estimating is that those numbers during the NFL Draft here in Detroit will double essentially. So we estimate around 600 individuals being trafficked with 60 of those being children," Szczygiel said. "It's an estimate that's on par with most major cities in the U.S., which is why we're working on increasing public awareness."

The FBI Detroit has two victim specialists embedded in their squad to assist in victim recovery. For children who are recovered, Michigan Child Protective Services is involved in locating the child's family or finding a safe space like **Vista Maria**, a nonprofit in Dearborn Heights that works with trafficking survivors, or Children's Village in Oakland County. For adults, the agency relies on nonprofit partners to help provide resources.

"We definitely saw a boost during the pandemic and, since then, I haven't seen it go back down. It's steadily rising," said Szczygiel, who has been with the FBI for 16 years. "For all major events, we solicit more support, but our operations will remain the same."

Efforts to combat trafficking

On Wednesday, a coalition comprised of leaders from the Michigan Restaurant & Lodging Association, Detroit Restaurant & Lodging Association, Visit Detroit, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Michigan, Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, the FBI Detroit, Homeland Security Investigations and the American Hotel & Lodging Association are scheduled to host an educational training for hotel, restaurant and operators how to identify, report and prevent trafficking. The event called "No Room for Trafficking in Detroit" starts at 10 a.m. at Westin Book Cadillac.

Hotels are frequently exploited by traffickers because they are perceived as anonymous and risk-free locations. There is also heightened awareness at airports, massage parlors and especially online platforms, authorities said.

In most of her cases, adults and children are meeting through video games and all kinds of internet interactions with one another and that leads them outside of their homes and to spaces where they can be trafficked, said Palepu with the Attorney General's office.

"We're not talking about white vans that are going to drive through and grab up a child. We're talking about people coming into your homes without you even knowing it because it's coming through their mobile devices," Palepu said. "Labor trafficking is also very prevalent in Michigan with migrant workers and agricultural workers, but that can happen anywhere. There are so many places that you may even frequent them but don't see who is hidden in the back."

Lori Cohen, CEO of PACT, an education and advocacy group, said the group has been working with researchers who are scraping social media posts to monitor advertisements for sexual services.

"And our research has shown that there is a definite spike during large sporting events across the country," Cohen said. "Additionally, as an attorney, I've represented clients who shared with me that their traffickers anticipated an increased demand for sexual services on game days."

It's not only an issue on game days, but every day. That's why task forces in Detroit and Michigan are reviewing existing state laws and making recommendations to the Legislature to improve them in a bid to deter human trafficking, Cohen said.

Vista Maria, a social services organization in Dearborn Heights, and Alternative School for Girls in Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park all said they work closely with authorities and are prepared to take in youth survivors 24/7.

Red flags

Szczygiel said some misconceptions and stereotypes are "glorified, especially with social media, in Hollywood or television about what trafficking is." He said there are a range of indicators that could suggest someone is being trafficked.

"If you have a son or daughter with a sudden behavior change, maybe they become more withdrawn or are gone from home more than usual," Szczygiel said. "If you know someone with an unexplained amount of money, their physical or attire changes suddenly. If young children start hanging out with older people is a common sign, and it goes as far as we've seen victims that are physically branded, tattoos of their trafficker's name and that's a more obvious example.

"It's important to look at the totality of the circumstance, but if you start seeing a few of these indicators line up, that could be a sign of human trafficking."

For travelers, authorities said to look for guests checking in without luggage. Other signs are those looking tired, malnourished and fearful of making eye contact. Other red flags can include someone not dressed appropriately for the weather or an individual who is controlling reservations for a large group. Hotel staff also should be watching for if a guest refuses housekeeping visits but asks for an increased number of towels that doesn't correlate with the number of people for the room.

"It is very prevalent in Michigan," Palepau said. "People need to be vigilant about it, and if you see something uncomfortable, you should report it."

Advocates contend trafficking often goes unnoticed because people have mislabeled it as prostitution.

"People in our country think prostitution is a choice that you make, and really nobody would choose that. They just don't have any other options or they've been tricked into it, forced into it," said Theresa Flores, creator of the SOAP Project (Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution), a volunteer organization that works on education, advocacy, prevention of human trafficking and providing restorative services.

'Planting the seeds' of opposition

On April 20, the SOAP Project is scheduled to hold an educational session from 1 p.m.-3:30 p.m. at the Brightmoor Christian Church in Novi. They'll educate attendees on the signs of human trafficking while labeling bars of soap that they'll be distributing to more than 100 hotels and motels in Metro Detroit. They also hang posters of missing children from the area and have materials printed in Arabic and Hindi.

"I feel like we're planting the seeds," Flores said. "I would not encourage people to intervene in a physical way because it can be dangerous because for traffickers ... this is their money. I would have people call 911. Also, stop second guessing ourselves when we see situations and think 'Oh no, it's probably not that' or 'I don't want to get involved' because I wish somebody would have gotten involved and helped me, and every survivor feels that way."

The SOAP Project has 25 chapters around the country, and most of their chapters are based in Michigan and Ohio.

Flores said she and others have campaigned to increase fines in Michigan and Ohio to deter trafficking and increase the prosecution for the "alarming number of family members that are trafficking, especially in Michigan."

The NFL Draft attracts mostly men, and they are buyers in human trafficking, she said.

In Michigan, a first offense of prostitution or solicitation is a misdemeanor crime that is punishable by up to 93 days in jail, a fine not to exceed \$500 or both. The penalties increase with each conviction.

"But that's not much of a deterrent. Some places, there are \$10,000 fines," Flores said. "If we increase fines, we can lower demand. That's really the only way we can stop this. There's not enough soap in the world that's going to save these kids."

Penalties for human trafficking in Michigan, however, start at 10 years to life imprisonment and can increase up to 15 or 20 years, depending on the crime.

"Not only can victims ask for all costs suffered as a consequence of their bondage, such as medical costs, they can also ask for a restitution order that finally recognizes the value of the years of their life lost due to the crime," according to the Michigan Attorney General's website.

Flores' advocacy is personal. She said she was trafficked as a teenager in Birmingham, where she grew up. Now, living in Ohio, she said she would like stricter penalties for those convicted of trafficking, which she calls a "silent epidemic."

Flores said she was a good kid from a normal family who lived in a nice house. At 15 years old, her family moved to Birmingham, and she quickly fell for a well-dressed boy at school who also went to the same church. However, her parents didn't approve and said she needed to be older to date. One day, the boy offered her a ride home, but he didn't drive her home and instead showed her his large home.

"All it took was three words. He said, 'I like you,'" Flores said in her 2011 TED talk. "I thought everything would be OK, but it wasn't. What he did was very common. He showed me around and offered me a pop, and I did not know that pop was laced with something."

Flores said she didn't tell her family initially because she disobeyed her parent's teaching and grew up in a Catholic family that valued virginity. She was later blackmailed with photos of her being sexually abused and was told she had to "earn them back or else."

It is personal, too, for King, the trafficking survivor. At 15 years old, King was coerced into prostitution while living in Grand Rapids. She became trapped and a drug addict for more than 20 years and even tried to take her own life, but said, "God wouldn't let me die."

It was on July 4, 2000, she said, that she found the strength to break free and enrolled in Rose Haven, a shelter for former prostitutes run by the Dominican Sisters of the Good Shepherd Ministry in Grand Rapids. She said she was the first resident of Rose Haven to become a staff member and was later hired by the Grand Rapids Police Department as an outreach coordinator "going right back into the streets working with the same women I used to get high with."

In 2005, King opened Sacred Beginnings, a refuge for trafficking victims, and she consults with law enforcement agencies, human service professionals, clergy and academic institutions. She said she has since aided 20,000 women and children.

In that spirit, King said she is traveling to Detroit to work at saving others.

"There's a lot of money, there's a lot of drugs, there's a lot of drinking, and there's a lot of trafficking at events like these," said King, who recalled traveling frequently to be trafficked by her pimps at Super Bowl host cities. "I travel, I advocate because a lot of women want to get out, but don't know how or they're afraid. When I get down there, if they're ready to exit, I

will be able to assist and help them. And if not, they will have my information and when they're ready to give me a call, I will help extract them then."

She said she lets her experience be her guide.

"I've been there, done that. I know what to look for," King said. "I know the movements, and I move accordingly. God allowed me to go through what I went through so I could go back and get the others."

srahal@detroitnews.com

@SarahRahal_

What to do if you suspect trafficking

The National Human Trafficking tip hotline is (888) 373-7888. Intake calls are then relayed to the local authorities and the Michigan Attorney General's Office.