

A new focus on problem of human trafficking

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Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board

Those confronting the human trafficking issue still must overcome a sentiment that it happens somewhere else, not in the Yakima Valley. Leaders of the service and faith communities know it is happening here, and earlier this month they conducted a forum aimed at raising awareness about the problem.

The Yakima Association of Churches and Faith Communities and the Seattle-based Faith Action Network have made the issue a priority. So has the Zonta Club of the Yakima Valley, a service group whose goals include promoting the status of women and advocating respect for human rights.

Zonta Club member Danielle Surkatty, who last year was honored by the local chapter for her work on the issue, focuses on the trafficking of minors who are sexually exploited. Statistics are difficult to come by, she says, because law enforcement and social service providers still are learning how to recognize youths — primarily girls — who have been roped into sex trafficking.

In Yakima, the number of identified sex-trafficking victims rose from two in 2010 to 28 last year, but Surkatty credits the increase to better recognition of the problem. She says Zonta has done basic awareness training in schools, whose staffers then are calling the Yakima Police Department. Victims are referred to Comprehensive Mental Health, which compiles the numbers. Surkatty says after training, one principal identified 11 children in a particular school who fit the profile of a victim.

Gang members are responsible for much of the trafficking. Surkatty says young adult men will target vulnerable girls under age 18, court them, groom them, and then essentially take on the role of a pimp while selling the girls for sexual favors. Just as Zonta and the faith community have recognized the problem, so has the Washington Legislature. “Washington state is at the top tier of states of the union,” says Surkatty. “Our Legislature has given our community so many tools to stop trafficking.”

The Legislature started addressing the problem more than a decade ago. The state was among the first in the nation to criminalize trafficking. Minors accused of prostitution are first referred to social service agencies instead of being prosecuted; those who pay for sex with a minor can be assessed a \$1,500 fine. In this session, a bill is moving forward that would deem domestic servitude — bringing someone to work into a house that essentially becomes a prison — as human trafficking.

Much work remains to be done. People outside of law enforcement and social services need to learn to recognize the problem, and there are never enough facilities to shelter victims. What has been viewed as the problem of runaways living on the streets isn't new, but as Surkatty says, "we're looking at it through a new lens." The new lens will sharpen a new focus that lets a growing number of people see the problem as is really is.

- Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.



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"Gang members are responsible for much of the trafficking."

Just one more reason we need the STATE to get busy and give us some anti-gang laws. Before, it wasn't enough to have murders, shootings, violent and property crimes, particularly for our do-nothing-for-victims, ACLU, and their two primary obstructionist bed-partners and a racist, Margarita Prentice from Renton, and Lisa Brown, from Spokane. At east they are now retired and perhaps we can get our NEW so-called bipartisan legislature to FINALLY do something about this. We need a new push for the tools to help us rid ourselves of the gangster vermin that inhabit our home cities.

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