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Catholic Charities agencies respond to influx of trafficking victims

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Aug. 23, 2013
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An influx of human trafficking victims seeking assistance is leading Catholic Charities agencies nationwide to develop a wider range of specialized service to enable victims to rebuild their lives.

From life skills and parenting classes to helping victims adjust to a life free of coercion and mistreatment, the agencies are adapting operations so those who have escaped a trafficking situation are not victimized again by unscrupulous traders in human lives.

The new services are emerging as more trafficking victims are identified by social workers and law enforcement officers, explained Marissa Castellanos, human trafficking program manager for Catholic Charities in the archdiocese of Louisville, Ky.

She credited ongoing training that victim advocates and Catholic Charities workers have directed toward police, prosecutors, judges, social workers and other interested people for the rise in the number of victims being identified.

Whereas in earlier years a victim may have been identified as a prostitute or as being in the country illegally, officials are better recognizing the telltale signs that someone is being trafficked. The result is that a victim ends up being sent to a reliable social service agency rather than to jail.

"The education and training we're doing throughout the country is vital to identifying victims," Castellanos told Catholic News Service.

"We know that trafficking has been present, but just that it wasn't identified at the time or it was identified incorrectly," she said.

The experience of Catholic Charities in Louisville is tallied, along with the work of 28 other diocesan Catholic Charities agencies in a recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Conducted over a month's time in September and October 2012 for Catholic Charities USA, the study found that all 29 agencies responding to a survey reported working with trafficking victims.

The agencies aided 239 victims -- an average of nine per agency -- in the preceding 12 months. In contrast, a similar CARA study in 2005 showed that responding agencies reported serving an average of four trafficking victims in the previous year.

Originally 48 agencies were contacted to participate in the study. Forty agreed to join it.

The local agencies reported serving far more adults than children -- 84 percent to 16 percent. Of the total, 44 percent were women and 40 percent were men.

The vast majority of trafficking victims served, 89 percent, were foreign-born while just 7 percent were U.S.

citizens. As for their circumstances, 57 percent of clients escaped from labor situation while 43 percent were victims of sex trafficking.

"Our agencies see more labor victims. We don't often hear about it. It's what we can bring to the conversation," said Julie Zorb, manager of policy and research for Catholic Charities USA.

Zorb also pointed to the finding that local agencies are seeing far more adults than children, who are often the age group identified in anti-trafficking campaigns.

Candy Hill, executive vice president for social policy and external affairs at Catholic Charities USA, told CNS that training about human trafficking has made a tremendous difference among in identifying people of all ages who are being enslaved for work or sex.

The evolution is akin to the awareness of child abuse that emerged in the 1970s and domestic violence a decade later, Hill said.

Despite the improved ability to identify trafficking victims, Hill admitted that local agencies have a long way to go to better meet the needs of people caught in a cycle of abuse and enslavement. The most significant need is shelter and or supportive housing, she said.

"Many of the shelters that are available are general population shelters that trafficking victims went to and they're vulnerable in that environment to being abused as well," she explained.

Castellanos called sheltering victims "a complicated issue."

"Sometime it's better for victims to be on their own, in other housing situations, to deal with the isolation as opposed to being with others where they can be victimized again," Castellanos said.

Castellanos locally and Hill nationally have advocated for improved government support of trafficking assistance programs.

In Kentucky, for example, the Human Trafficking Victims Rights Act went into effect June 26. It increases protections for human trafficking victims primarily by targeting individuals who exploit children for sexual purposes by increasing penalties and prison sentences. It also has a training component and a provision whereby property used in the trafficking trade can be seized and sold off to benefit victim services and training programs. But those funds are still far off, Castellanos said.

"Once you get the money and can demonstrate success, it's easier then to advocate for more money because you've had good outcome," Hill added.

Castellanos stressed that trafficking remains a serious concern and that it occurs in communities across the country.

"Despite the belief that this is not happening in rural communities, it's happening just as often," she explained. "We're seeing the same type of crimes throughout Kentucky as people are seeing in urban or border areas throughout the country.

"It's even more difficult to identify (in a state like Kentucky) because knowledge about it may be lower and there's a lot of isolation (of victims) that allows these crimes to continue without intervention," Castellanos said.

The study will be presented to Catholic Charities USA's national advisory committee during the agency's annual gathering Sept. 15-17 in San Francisco for comment and a discussion on next steps.

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