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Ahead of Super Bowl, efforts against trafficking come to forefront

Colleen Dunne | Jan. 22, 2014

As Americans gather around the television to watch the Super Bowl on Feb. 2, human trafficking victims' advocates, social service agencies and law enforcement officials will use this major sporting event to bring awareness to the plight of the millions of people who are trafficked across the globe each year.

"About five years ago, we realized that in particular with large sporting events like the Olympics, World Cup and the Super Bowl, there was a high potential for an increase in trafficked persons, primarily for sex tourism," said Dominican Sr. Patricia Daly, executive director of the New Jersey-based Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment.

Statistics from the International Labor Organization, an agency of the United Nations, show 20.9 million people each year are victims of this modern-day slavery, forced to work by coercion or threat. According to statistics from End Childhood Prostitution and Slavery (ECPAT-USA), 1.2 million children are trafficked annually and hotels are a common spot for the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The tri-State coalition represents an alliance of 40 Roman Catholic institutions located throughout the New York metro area in guiding investment decisions and engaging companies on global and justice concerns. Daly's organization is also a member of a larger umbrella organization, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), which represents 250 faith-based organizations in responsible investing. These organizations work with members in bringing awareness to issues of human dignity and justice by pressing for responsible corporate policies of the companies in which they invest.

"Eight years ago, we started to include the concerns around human trafficking in our work with companies," Daly told *NCR*. "We first started seeing the travel and tourism industry was at risk. This is when we first filed resolutions with publicly held hotels and airlines. We wanted to press the companies to do training so that all of their employees were really aware of these concerns and were aware of what to do if they recognized these concerns."

With the Super Bowl coming to the New York metro area, Daly is working as part of a network of organizations, including law enforcement agencies, to heighten awareness of an expected spike in the labor and sex trade as more people with disposable income travel into the area and as hotels and restaurants seek additional employees to manage more guests.

One of Daly's major tasks, along with her staff, has been working with a coalition of people to organize training for volunteers who will make contact with hotel managers and encourage front-line preparation of hotel staff to recognize the signs of trafficking activity.

"We are working with over 400 volunteers reaching out to about 1,200 hotels," Daly said. "These volunteers have been trained to really establish a relationship with a general manager of a hotel and invite them into conversation of trafficking risks around their hotel."

The Rev. David Schilling, a United Methodist who serves as senior program director for the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, considers it important for investors to be conscious of the conditions a company provides for workers and how those workers end up in certain places. He believes the trafficking industry exploits people for having dreams and for trying to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

"Over the last six to eight years, we have engaged a whole range of hotel chains and airlines in order to get them to put company policies and practices in place, and we have had good success," Schilling said. "Part of it is a combination of faith-based moral voice with a role as part owners of a company. It is a unique role as investors in a company to get the company aware of what the issues are."

Volunteers are asking hotel managers to train their staff to recognize trafficking activity and to know what to do and who to contact. Daly emphasized this effort relies heavily on working with law enforcement to know which hotels are under investigation and should not be approached and what resources are available to victims.

In New Jersey, this effort is focused on meeting statutes the New Jersey Legislature passed into law in May 2013, called the Human Trafficking Prevention, Protection, and Treatment Act. This legislation mandates training programs for certain government and nongovernment entities to recognize the seriousness of trafficking and its impact on human rights.

"The training of hotels is something that our statutes require," said Tracy Thompson, assistant New Jersey attorney general and program director for the New Jersey Human Trafficking Task Force. "We have trained other sectors, emergency medical responders, nurses, taxi cab drivers, managers of truck stops and rest stops, and other health care professionals who will come into contact with victims of human trafficking."

Thompson, along with other advocates for awareness of trafficking activities, emphasized the intent is not to vilify the National Football League or sponsors of other large sporting events, but to create cooperation by using these events to raise awareness of illegal activities that violate human rights.

"When people sit down to watch, it is family-friendly and a lot of good times will be had," Thompson said. "At the same time, there are people coming to this state to take advantage of and exploit the labor and commercial sexual industry."

Even though Thompson, Daly and Schilling say they hope to form partnerships with the NFL and the New York metro area Super Bowl host committee, so that more channels for awareness are available, those connections have been slow to cultivate.

"We've reached out [to the metro Super Bowl] host committee and they have agreed to publish our red flag indicators sheet, developed in conjunction with Polaris [Project, an anti-trafficking organization] and the federal government, in their Super Bowl volunteer manual," Thompson said. "We haven't had any other concrete initiatives or partnerships beyond that."

In an email to *NCR*, an NFL spokesman emphasized working with local law enforcement in response to human trafficking.

"We share their concerns and support strong human trafficking laws," wrote Brian McCarthy, vice president for communications for the NFL. "We work closely with federal, state and local law enforcement to ensure that the

Super Bowl is a safe environment for the host community and the fans who enjoy the game and the celebration."

With more opportunities for training on the schedule and online training available in January, Daly and Schilling stressed there is more work to be done before Feb. 2, but they are pleased with the response so far from hotels.

"Right now, out of 1,200 hotels, we have had a 79 percent response rate where general managers are at least willing to put materials in the room where staff members can see them," Daly said. "Some of them have actually attended trainings, some have implemented trainings in their hotel and some more are planning it because we will offer online training."

Daly also said there is an event planned the week before the Super Bowl called the "S.O.A.P. UP New Jersey Mobilization," in conjunction with the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking and the S.O.A.P. (Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution) project, where volunteers will deliver free bars of soap to low-budget hotels with New Jersey's trafficking hotline number in hopes that victims will have access to a resource to be rescued.

Schilling also highlighted the importance of using opportunities such as the Super Bowl to get the message out about human trafficking and the suffering that results from modern-day slavery.

"We are aware that when you look at some of these major events like the Super Bowl, it really is a tremendous opportunity to spread awareness of what human trafficking and modern slavery looks like," he said. "The first reaction is [that] we abolished slavery 150 years ago in this country and we know there are issues in other parts of the world, but it's not us. There are thousands of young women who are trafficked here in New York City who are in vulnerable situations and get exploited."

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