

Social media 'effective and sinister' way for traffickers to lure victims, campaign warns

Social media has evolved into a 'highly effective and sinister way for sex traffickers' to lure potential victims, say advocates aiming to raise awareness of human trafficking in the community.

January is Crime Stoppers Month, a time to raise awareness of Crime Stoppers, which allows members of the public to submit crime tips to police either over the phone or online, with a reward for tips that lead to arrests.

The theme for Crime Stoppers Month 2023 is 'Stand Up and Stand Together.'

Crime Stoppers Month officially kicked off last week at 360° Kids, a Richmond Hill-based shelter for at-risk youth, which regularly steps up to support young victims who have escaped the cycle of human trafficking.

The kick-off also heralded the launch of a new media campaign, endsextrafficking.ca, which aims to engage youth on human trafficking in the 'online environment' in which many victims are reached.

'While there are many horrific cases of human trafficking where victims are recruited through means of threats, deception, violence and kidnapping, through this campaign we want to ensure our community knows this isn't always the case,' said Sydney Teixeira of Renegade Digital Media, the developers behind the campaign.

'Social media has turned out to be highly effective and sinister way for sex traffickers to access, approach and lure in potential victims. We want to help our community make better judgements about their relationships and friendships, especially those they have created online. As we launch the digital campaign, we're flipping the script and we're engaging youth in the same online environment that are often targeted. Our intention with the strategy is simple: increase awareness and education and improve prevention and protection within our community.'

If the campaign resonates with those who see it, Teixeira added, they hope it helps people feel 'empowered to listen to your gut.'

'If something feels too good to be true, it probably is. If something feels off, please don't ignore it. Support is available.'

This is the kind of support offered day in and day out by 360° Kids.

Bonnie Harkness, Chief Operating Officer for 360° Kids, said the youth they see are the most vulnerable in the community and vulnerable youth are targets for pimps.

'For us, that is where the whole program was really launched,' she said. 'We began to offer supports and services to young people, to help them leave some of those horrible experiences they were in. Our whole program was set up to serve survivors of human trafficking and it was the first of its kind in York Region.'

'You have to do something to prevent this from ever happening in the first place, so it is not just some kids that are going to be vulnerable to trafficking, it is all of our kids who are going to be vulnerable. As a parent to two young women, I appreciate so much how important it is to protect our children, but protecting our children is no longer sheltering them. We have to make sure we get there and we educate them.'

According to York Regional Police (YRP) Detective Gary McBride, human trafficking isn't limited to sex trafficking. They are seeing more labour trafficking cases where people are exploited, 'and they're exploited due to their status, a lack of understanding of Canada's laws and their rights here. These people end up working and living in deplorable conditions.'

?YRP relies on several community partners in York Region to provide resources and services to those impacted by human trafficking to help them rebuild their lives?. Our investigators regularly meet some of the most vulnerable people in York Region who have some immediate needs that most of us here today take for granted. These needs are filled by our community partners, not just the police, and these community partners include 360° Kids and it's taking place today here in York Region. Our human trafficking investigators know from cases and their daily interactions with survivors that we're just one part of the effort to combat human trafficking and the exploitation of people, including with 360° Kids, who also represent and service our most vulnerable youth in this Region.?

McBride added that tips related to potential human trafficking cases, delivered through police or anonymously via Crime Stoppers, may lead to an arrest or saving someone from being exploited.

?Those being exploited are someone's child, they may be someone's sibling, or have simply come to Canada in search of a better life, just like most residents of York Region.?

Added YRP Deputy Chief Al Almeida: ?This year's theme, Stand Up Stand Together, highlights our shared values of inclusion, respect for cultural differences, equity and a commitment to social justice. We stand up together, we stand together for safe communities fighting against criminal activities and the police can't do this alone. We rely on the members of our community to stand up and speak out against crime and provide information when they know a crime has been committed because we all want to live in a safe community.?

To submit a tip to Crime Stoppers, call 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or visit 1800222tips.com.

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