



Opening Our Eyes to  
**HUMAN  
TRAFFICKING**

By Lilla Ross



In the last year at least 37 victims of human trafficking have been discovered in Northeast Florida. There are probably more but law enforcement hasn't found them yet.

Americans think slavery ended with the Civil War. But today an estimated 2 million people worldwide live in slavery. As many as 18,000 people are trafficked – sold for labor or sex – in the United States, according to the Department of Justice.

“Nationwide it is the third largest criminal enterprise behind drugs and gun smuggling,” said Lt. Mike Eason of the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office and a member of the Northeast Florida Human Trafficking Task Force. “But it is under-reported so we don’t really know how bad it is.”

Florida is the third largest destination for human traffickers behind Texas and California. Although more cases have been prosecuted in South Florida, several cases in North Florida have come to light:

- In August, seven Jacksonville men were arrested for prostituting a 15-year-old girl, who managed to run away and call her mother.
- In 2009, a Virginia man was sentenced to 50 years for bringing two teenage girls to Jacksonville and forcing them into prostitution.
- In December three people are going on trial in Alachua County, accused of trafficking 34 Haitians to work in the fields.

The victims of human trafficking can be American or foreign born, adults or children.

Increasingly, teenagers who have runaway or become alienated from their families in some way are being recruited, sometimes through the Internet, and forced into prostitution or other illegal activities, Eason said. (See *Cyber Security* story in the July 2010 issue)

Most commonly, human trafficking victims are foreigners who have come to this country legally or illegally to find work and a better life.

In Florida, they are usually from the

Caribbean and Central America.

Traffickers go to a poor country, such as earthquake-ravaged Haiti, and recruit workers. They promise to get them the necessary documents, transportation and jobs, but once they are in the United States, the traffickers refuse to give the workers their passports and other papers. They are loaded on a truck and dropped off in the middle of nowhere where they are forced to pick crops or perform other labor, said Sheila Hopkins of the Florida Catholic Conference.

They may be forced to pick crops, do construction, clean or provide sex, she said.

“They are confused and scared. They probably don’t speak much English. They don’t have money or papers. They don’t know who to trust,” Hopkins said. “Depending on where they are from, they may be afraid of the police. They don’t know where they are and they don’t know how to get help.”

Traffickers often will charge the workers for room and board and other necessities, so the worker ends up “owing” the trafficker. And the workers may not realize that the way they are being treated is against the law.

To keep that level of confusion, the traffickers often move the workers to other areas of the state every few weeks. That way they can’t make friends or get familiar with the area.

The Catholic Church is in a unique position to help because it is one place many of these victims, who often are from predominately Catholic countries, will turn to for help.

The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) has launched a nationwide initiative to train Catholics how to recognize and respond to human trafficking. The Florida Catholic Conference has established a task force, and Bill Beitz,

executive director of Catholic Charities, is representing the diocese.

“We want to involve people in the parish – especially parishes in rural areas. We want them to watch for signs of trafficking,” Beitz said. “The person in the pew next to you could be a victim.”

Each parish is being asked to appoint a representative who will be the point person for this initiative. They will take part in a training workshop on Oct. 9 at Bishop John Snyder High School in Jacksonville.

They will be asked to share this information with their parishes and help the parish determine how it wants to respond with donations of money or volunteers.

Other educational efforts will be conducted in schools and hospitals.

Then on Jan. 30, 2011, which has been declared Human Trafficking Sunday, parishes throughout the state will have special programs to highlight the issue, Hopkins said.

In addition, Catholic Charities Gainesville Regional Office is now under contract with the USCCB to provide case management for human trafficking victims.

More than 60 victims have been discovered in the last three years, said Karen Slevin, director of the Gainesville office.

The victims need a variety of services. “It will vary with each case, but we will be helping them with emergency services, housing, food, medical appointments,” Slevin said. “We will help them with language classes, take them to court dates, help them find work. We will walk with them through the process.

“It is a hard thing to wrap our mind around,” she said. “It’s hard to imagine that 30 miles from a world-class university people are living in slavery.”

**To learn more about the dirty business of human trafficking, visit these websites:**

**USCCB website on human trafficking**  
[www.usccb.org/mrs/trafficking/index.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/trafficking/index.shtml)

**Florida Coalition against Human Trafficking**  
[www.stophumantrafficking.org/](http://www.stophumantrafficking.org/)