Church, Sheriff's Office raise human trafficking awareness

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St. Mary's County, MD - Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery that is widely overlooked, especially in rural areas. Despite conventional thinking, trafficking is not confined to third world countries. It takes place throughout our state: in our communities, in our neighborhoods, in places no one would ever expect to find such a horrific circumstance. Trafficking in human beings is a global epidemic that can include pornography, forced labor, and sex trafficking. According to the Human Trafficking Resource Center, Human trafficking is a $32 billion per year industry that has surpassed the illegal sale of firearms and is projected to surpass the sale of drugs in just a few short years.

On Friday, May 13, 2016, the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office hosted a seminar, in partnership with Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in Lexington Park, MD. Speakers from the Calvert County State's Attorney's Office, the Department of Homeland Security, the St. Mary's County Circuit Court, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, helped educate attendees about ongoing human trafficking and the local impact of this crime. Over 200 citizens, including residents of St. Mary's and Calvert counties, St. Mary's County Commissioner Tom Jarboe, representatives of the public schools, and other community leaders, were in attendance.

Melissa Snow, a keynote speaker, expressed her gratitude for the event, "I am inspired by how the community is standing together to protect children. Education and awareness are the first most important steps in knowing how to prevent and identify sex trafficking. And every person who attended last week's event is better equipped to do just that." She added, "I also want to commend the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office. They are taking a stand and sending a strong message that our women and children are not for sale. I'm grateful for their ongoing efforts to make this community safer for everyone."

Kelly Williams, a resident of St. Mary's County, said, "The whole event was extremely well attended, enlightening, and very eye-opening. I didn't realize this was happening in 'my own backyard.' I learned information that I can take away from this event and apply to my life. I appreciate that events like these are helping to change the stigma associated with human trafficking, as a victimless crime."

Kathryn Marsh, Deputy State's Attorney for Calvert County, kicked-off the awareness event discussing internet safety, teen usage and perpetrator accountability in Maryland. According to Marsh, "We are severely behind the times when it comes to how these crimes are handled in the legal system." In Maryland, it is a misdemeanor to traffic adults, but a felony when a child is involved. Even so, Marsh says, "The laws aren't severe enough in Maryland to deter the traffickers from doing the awful things they do to these boys and girls." Based on information provided by victims and traffickers, Marsh stated, "Maryland is viewed as a goldmine for traffickers."

According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Special Agent Vaughn Harper, "People find Maryland an attractive destination for many reasons, including its diverse population, numerous professional sports teams and events, proximity to other major cities on the east coast, major transit systems including airports, buses, and trains, and the proliferation of major casinos. These factors are a big reason Maryland is a targeted location for those involved in human trafficking," he added. "HSI works in partnership with other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to investigate all types of human trafficking cases, including investigations involving adult and juvenile victims, United States citizens and foreign nationals. When federal agencies get involved with these kinds of cases, the federal statutes and sentencing guidelines are a major tool in combating human trafficking, as federal penalties are often more severe than are most state penalties. For example, the federal statute for sex trafficking of a minor carries a mandatory minimum of 10 years and up to life imprisonment. Those convicted of violating these statutes serve approximately 85 percent of their time, and there is no parole in the federal system."

Harper went on to say, "Human trafficking isn't just comprised of sexual-based exploitation, but also consists of labor trafficking. Traffickers prey on victims with little or no social safety net. They look for victims who are vulnerable because of their illegal immigration status, limited English proficiency, economic hardship, political instability, natural disasters, or other causes. Many of these victims are lured with false promises of well-paying jobs; instead, they are forced or coerced into domestic servitude or other types of forced labor. Victims are found in legitimate and illegitimate labor industries, including sweatshops, massage parlors, agricultural fields, restaurants, hotels, and domestic service."

Melissa Snow, a Child Sex Trafficking Specialist from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, spoke about the vulnerability of children in human trafficking, and urged parents to create safety nets. Snow noted that the internet has become the largest marketplace for the buying and selling of children in the United States. One in five runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2015 were likely sex trafficking victims.

Snow provided the audience with websites that can help protect children when they are online. The website www.netsmartz.org is an interactive, educational program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children® that educates children on how to recognize potential internet risks and engages children and adults in two-way conversations about on- and off-line risks, using video, games, activity cards and presentations. "Kids tell other kids more than they will tell adults. If we educate our children about what is and isn't appropriate online, they can help convince another child to get help if they are in a threatening situation," said Snow. She also discussed www.cybertipline.com, a website for reporting potentially suspicious online activity. "There is never something too small to report," said Snow. "You never know if that tiny bit of information could potentially be the missing piece to help with a case or to prevent child sexual exploitation from occurring."

St. Mary’s County Circuit Court Judge Michael Stamm spoke about the impact that trafficking is having on the child welfare system. Stamm noted that according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in 2012 sixty-seven percent of missing children have come out of the foster care system.

"Children often enter the foster care system already vulnerable from their previous home life," Stamm said. "It takes a community to raise a child. Our area needs special and caring families who have the desire to help at-risk youth, and who are willing to open their hearts and their homes to take in foster children. Only twenty-six foster homes have been approved in St. Mary’s County. Grooming these children who are already so desperate to be loved and to have a sense of family is easy for traffickers in these conditions. We need more adults who are willing to be foster care parents."

Sheriff Tim Cameron, of St. Mary's County, stated, "Human trafficking is the fastest growing illegal criminal activity except for drug trafficking." Cameron noted that there had been documented cases of human trafficking and subsequent arrests within St. Mary's County. "Human trafficking involves force, fraud, and coercion. Our agency will continue to combat human trafficking through collaboration and education of deputies and the community, so they can spot the signs of human

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trafficking and act accordingly."

Commander of Vice/Narcotics, Captain Daniel Alioto, added, “Sheriff Cameron has initiated, supported and sponsored training and education events to make officers and the public aware of the presence of human trafficking in St. Mary's County and throughout the State of Maryland. We will continue to move forward, but cannot be successful without these continued collaborative efforts. Our partnerships include other state, local, and federal agencies; however, the critical partnership will always be the community.”

In closing, Lisa Brandt, a member of Cornerstone Church, shared her passion for helping other parents understand the dangers our children face with technology. “It’s possible to put an end to this modern-day slavery,” she said. “Everyday citizens like you and I need to report suspicious activity and do our part to help. It’s our job to educate ourselves and our families, even when it’s easier just to look away from the evil.”