



Group: Farmworkers can be trafficking target

By Janine Zeitlin

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FORT MYERS — Farmworkers can fall into the hands of human traffickers in an industry where labor abuses can be hard to detect unless victims come forward, farmworker advocates said Monday.

The Lee County Human Trafficking Task Force, formerly known as The Coalition Against Human Trafficking in Southwest Florida, hosted about 50 service providers, law enforcers and community members at its Monday meeting to gain workers' perspectives about human trafficking.

The chain of command in agriculture makes it difficult to pinpoint and prove who is guilty when a human trafficking case takes root in Florida farm fields, advocates said.

"It's in a hierarchy and it creates a lot of problems as far as who is to blame," said Elena Grossman, a paralegal with Florida Rural Legal Services in Fort Myers.

Immigrants who don't have papers often pay smugglers to sneak them across borders. The going rate to get smuggled has increased from \$2,000 to \$3,500 while the federal debate about immigration rolls along and many eyes are fixed on shoring up the borders, advocates said.

Advocates say higher debts could make people more vulnerable to trafficking.

"It is very possible because, now, your debt is much higher. The crew leader is going to pay more money for workers and it's very possible that this could increase. We have a great deal of work to do toward educating workers about going to the authorities," said Lucas Benitez, a leader with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group that has been investigating slavery cases since the 1990s.

While not all slavery cases involve illegal immigrants or human smuggling, many human traffickers use a smuggling debt and threats to keep workers in servitude.

Once workers cross into the United States and into places such as Arizona, drivers are waiting to offer them rides to other spots such as Immokalee to find work, advocates said. Crew leaders in past Florida trafficking cases have "bought" workers from drivers and forced immigrants to work off those debts before freeing them. Some crew leaders have skimmed "debts" from workers' checks.

Emmit Bryson, a Fort Myers-based Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) specialist, said many companies cut checks in workers' names and now send representatives to dole out the checks. Crew leaders keep "clean" records so abuse is difficult to detect unless someone comes forward, Bryson said.

The group pressed Eduardo Galvan, a DBPR investigator based in Immokalee, about the extent of corrupt crew leaders.

"The crew leader is in a business and, like any contractor in the state of Florida, they get used and they use," Galvan said, estimating there are between 600 and 700 registered labor contractors in Southwest Florida. "Like in all professions, you have good and you have bad."

Farmworkers, especially those here illegally, are wary about reporting trafficking and other abuses to law

enforcers since they assist in federal operations like the one announced Monday that netted more than 160 people for immigration violations in Collier and Lee counties.

"It's difficult because the police are obligated to work with immigration because it's a federal agency," Benitez said. "But we try to educate workers that you are not a criminal when you are in a slavery situation."

On Monday, one Lee County task force member suggested posting warnings about human trafficking inside buses used to transport farmworkers to the fields.

"It seems like a practical place to put posters," said Lisa Goehle, who has worked as a social service provider in Lehigh Acres.

She planned to contact state lawmakers about drafting a proposal to enforce posting warnings in buses.

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