

Fighting human trafficking

Provincial coalition to the rescue

Volunteer Edmonton

Special to The Examiner

Most of us might believe that human trafficking is a crime that doesn't exist in Canada.

Sadly, even horrifically, this is not the case.

That's why one organization in Edmonton is working to bring this issue to light and help fight the human trafficking that's happening in our own backyard.

"It's an issue Albertans are very passionate about. A lot of people want to do something about it," says Andrea Burkhart, manager of the Action Coalition on human Trafficking (ACT Alberta).

The newly-established coalition was formed about six years ago with a mission to identify and respond to human

trafficking in the province, help others understand the scope of human trafficking and work with community partners to address this complex issue.

"It's still a relatively misunderstood issue," Burkhart admits.

"Most of the media has focused on the trafficking of women from other countries. It does happen, but this issue can affect anyone. Traffickers prey on people who are vulnerable."

She emphasizes that men, children, even Canadian residents of any age or race, are at risk of being trafficked.

"Trafficking has nothing to do with the movement of an individual," says Burhart. "It's about exploitation."

Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery.

Victims are commonly lured with the promise of money, education, work, help for their family or simply a better life, while others may be forced into prostitution, pornography, sexual exploitation, forced labour, involuntary servitude or debt bondage.

Sadly, human trafficking is often under-reported and difficult to identify.

"The few stats that are available aren't reliable because the case may have been handled differently," Burkhart says.

She explains that if a human trafficking case, such as forced labour, is brought to the courts and convicted under a labour law instead of a human trafficking law, the case is no longer included as a human trafficking

statistic.

Despite the challenges, there is hope.

"There's a lot of despair associated with this issue. We want people to see that there are solutions," Burkhart says, adding that ACT Alberta works closely with other non-governmental organizations, law and police enforcement, social services and immigrant serving agencies, healthcare workers, government and more.

"It's a team approach because the issue is so big and the needs of victims are so diverse."

Burkhart hopes to begin engaging more people by expanding its volunteer program.

While volunteers do not work directly with victims, the

coalition is looking for support in other areas.

"We need volunteers to help with the operational side of things," she says, adding that the coalition is seeking a communications co-ordinator and a graphic designer.

To volunteer or for more information about the Action Coalition on human Trafficking, e-mail Andrea Burkhart at info@actalberta.org or visit its website at actalberta.org.

If you suspect human trafficking, report it to Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477).

For Volunteer Edmonton information or to suggest a story idea, contact Evelyn Pham at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call 780-732-6655 or check out volunteeredmonton.com.

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