

NCJTC

National Criminal Justice Training Center
Fox Valley Technical College

El Paso, Texas Community Response to Human Trafficking Symposium

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Introduction

The Texas Governor's Office, in collaboration with local, state, and national partners, held a Community Response to Human Trafficking Symposium in El Paso, Texas. The symposium was intended to collect information from key community stakeholders regarding the region's current response to human trafficking including; existing protocols, available resources, and priority needs. The stakeholders were identified by the Texas Governor's Office and local partners and invited to participate in a one-day convening. The symposium was made possible by funding from Amber Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP), a program of the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC).

Core Stakeholders:

Texas Governor's Office
El Paso County Juvenile Probation Department
El Paso County Attorney's Office
El Paso County District Attorney's Office
Ysleta School District
United State's Attorney's Office
Texas Department of Public Safety
Texas Anit-Gang Center
Casa of El Paso
Homeland Security Investigations
Federal Bureau of Investigations
The Department of State Health Services
The Department of Family and Protective Services
El Paso Center for Children
Paseo del Norte Center of Hope
All Saints Episcopal Church
El Paso Cares
The Children's Advocacy Center of El Paso
Current foster parents working with trafficked youth

Key Questions:

1. How are we defining commercial sexual exploitation of children?
2. Who are our victims, and how are we identifying them?
3. What happens in this community when a victim is identified in terms of protocol and response?
4. What do we know about pimps and purchasers in this community?
5. What would an ideal response to trafficking look like?
6. What are the priorities for next steps?
7. What issues or gaps exist?

Project Summary

In El Paso, diverse stakeholders representing government, social services, and community organizations assembled to discuss issues related to the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The symposium began with an overview of the challenges in addressing the trafficking of children by the Governor's Child Sex Trafficking Team. The hidden nature of the crime, lack of coordinated services, and impacts of complex trauma were discussed. The National Criminal Justice Training Center facilitator provided national context about trafficking before leading the group through a guided discussion.

During the discussion, the participants were clear in their commitment to engage in anti-trafficking efforts and expressed frustration with the lack of a well-defined, proactive, community response plan. Participants identified youth involved in the foster care system, homeless and transient youth, undocumented youth, and youth who identify as members of the LGBTQ community as highly vulnerable to victimization. Lack of strong, family support was identified as a significant contributing factor and local strip clubs, bars, and the Internet were identified as the locations most likely to be utilized to facilitate trafficking. The participants said many of the local pimps are gang involved and also discussed the regularity of pimps coming in from out of town to exploit victims in El Paso. Buyers were said to come from all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds; truck drivers passing through the area were named as high-frequency buyers.

The group explained that although some victims have been identified, many victims are being missed due to a lack of awareness and training. The victims that have been identified in the area were identified in various settings including during Department of Family and Protective Services and Juvenile Probation in-take processes, in schools, and within treatment facilities. Both the Juvenile Probation Department and the Department of Family and Protective Services reported plans to use a specialized assessment tool to identify victims of trafficking.

Representatives from Homeland Security and the US Attorney's Office discussed their focus on building cases involving Internet crimes against children in the area. Local law enforcement representatives were not present at the convening and participants expressed frustration with the local police and sheriff's department's lack of involvement in anti-trafficking efforts. It was said that the local police department has invested minimal resources into human trafficking response and has no proactive investigative efforts underway.

The group discussed the current community resources available to victims of trafficking including advocates, therapists, shelter placements, case managers, SANE nurses, federal investigators, and prosecutors. The participants talked about the importance of holistic, victim-centered, trauma informed, wraparound care. The Center for Children was named as a significant community resource with emergency beds, longer-term shelter, and case management offered. The group stated that many of the necessary resources already exist in El Paso and that with additional trafficking training and increased provider coordination an impactful service response model could be created.

Increased community awareness and stakeholder training were named as the most pressing priorities. Schoolteachers and administrators, faith based communities, and local law enforcement were identified as the stakeholders most in need of training. Creation of response protocols, resource guides, and designated interdisciplinary response teams were named as urgencies. The group felt that updating legislation and diversifying the provider workforce to mirror the diversity in victims were important next steps.

HOW ARE WE DEFINING COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The participants had various ideas about what constituted commercial sexual exploitation of children. They understood that force, fraud, or coercion were not required elements of the exploitation of children. They were also clear that kids often do not recognize their own victimization or name their experiences as commercial sexual exploitation. They named specific places where kids are trafficked including strip clubs and on the Internet. There was discussion about age and concern expressed regarding how different systems treat young people based on age.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Children on pornographic websites.
- Some young girls working in strip clubs are victims but see their situation as just a job.
- There are also adults just now realizing they were victims of commercial sexual exploitation.
- Transporting children across state lines for commercial exploitation.
- Force, fraud, or coercion but not necessary for children to be victims.
- It can be many different things and there are gaps in definition based on services being provided.
- There are different definitions of what a child is. Sometimes the age is 17, 18, or 21 depending on the circumstances (i.e. criminal prosecution, safety concerns, civil cases).
- Current community perception does not recognize male victimization.
- Professional adult definitions of trafficking are very different than how kids see their experiences. They don't see themselves as victims.
- We are missing many at-risk kids in foster homes.
- Juveniles have a language and their own way of communicating. We need to come down from professional language we use when talking to them. There are challenges with explaining to them that what was happening to them is wrong, and they will never see themselves as victims when they are getting what they want; for example, expensive clothes, makeup, and electronics.

WHO ARE OUR VICTIMS?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group recognized youth as a vulnerable time in general but specifically named specific strong family and community supports, homelessness, and gang involvement were all cited as circumstances that leave children susceptible to commercial sex trafficking. LGBTQ youth, were named as a particularly vulnerable risk factor that increase vulnerabilities in kids' lives. Lack of groups. The group also discussed the prevalence of social media and the Internet in luring young people into commercial sex. Representatives from Homeland Security and the US Attorney's Office discussed their focus on on-line investigations involving child pornography and exploitation.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Homeless and transient youth represent a vulnerable population and engage in survival sex.
- Kids with poor family supports.
- LGBTQ kids are highly vulnerable.
- Kids with anti-social behavior.
- Truant youth are vulnerable.
- Newly transplanted kids are vulnerable because they do not have supports or feel a sense of community.
- Youth involved with gangs are vulnerable due to their need to be in a family type situation.
- Undocumented minors are victims but underreport.
- US girls going into Mexico to party and get exploited.
- Social media is creating vulnerability for even very young children. There is a phone app that turns on a camera and allows predators to convince kids to undress.
- The US Attorney's office is currently working to expose child pornography rings.
- Homeland Security Investigators are also working on cyber crimes related to the sexual exploitation of children.
- Social media is creating vulnerabilities for kids.
- Girls are lured in believing they are taking modeling jobs.
- Juvenile probation is using an assessment tool during in-takes in an attempt to identify trafficked youth and refer them to resources.
- Recent incident of elderly ladies handing out Bible study invitations that were a ruse to lure kids into trafficking.
- Youth becoming involved with "sugar daddies" to gain material items.

HOW/WHERE ARE WE IDENTIFYING VICTIMS?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group named a few specific settings where victims have been identified including schools, juvenile detention facilities, drug treatment centers, emergency rooms, and during the in-take/recovery process with DFPS; however, most of the conversation focused on ways to improve the victim identification process. The group believed that many victims are being missed in El Paso, and that enhanced awareness and training is needed in order to improve the community's ability to identify victims.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Victims have disclosed to peers, teachers, and coaches and have been identified at school.
- El Paso Cares is currently developing teams to spread education and awareness at truck stops.
- Juvenile Probation Department indicated they experience delays in identifying victims because kids see them as authority figures, and it takes months to develop trust.
- Homeland Security indicated they are developing training for hotels and motels.
- The county Attorney's office said they could work to support anti-trafficking efforts through threats of civil penalties for involved hotels and motels.
- Victims disclose in drug treatment facilities.

WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED IN THESE EFFORTS AND IS NOT HERE?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group spent a significant amount of time discussing the absence of the local police department. The local police were not present during the meeting. The group explained that the local police department is minimally involved in identifying and/or responding to trafficking and felt increased involvement from local law enforcement would be essential to building an impactful community response. Several members of the group, including federal law enforcement officers, shared that the local police have not committed sufficient resources to anti-trafficking efforts. Federal law enforcement officers explained that there is only one investigator currently assigned to work all vice related crimes including commercial sexual exploitation of children, and that this reality prevents them from participating in proactive prevention, identification, or recovery efforts.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- The local police department
- The county sheriff's office
- Military police officers
- Postal mail carriers
- Utility workers
- Schools
- Faith based community

WHAT HAPPENS IN THIS COMMUNITY WHEN A VICTIM IS IDENTIFIED? WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group discussed the community resources available to victims including advocates, therapists, shelter placements, case managers, SANE nurses, federal investigators, and prosecutors. The group had a clear understanding that the complex trauma experienced by trafficking victims requires robust, wrap around, holistic services but lacked a specific, shared response strategy. The Department of Family and Protective Services send investigators out when notified of an identified victim. The investigators interview the child and work to identify appropriate placements. Due to the lack of placements, children are sometimes placed outside of El Paso, which complicates an already difficult investigation. The Juvenile Probation Department indicated that they contact Homeland Security when they identify a trafficking victim. The group also indicated that trafficked young women (17+) are arrested and taken to county jail where they receive no services and are quickly released and picked up by their pimps.

The lack of local law enforcement involvement in anti-trafficking efforts was brought up again as a barrier to victim identification. With no proactive investigative efforts in place, the community has very little experience with victim identification, recovery, service provision, investigation, and prosecution.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Child Protection worker indicated he calls an investigator, tries to find a placement, and tries to identify a therapist for the child but indicated there are gaps in service.
- A DPS agent indicated he refers to victim's specialist, builds an investigation, and seeks prosecution.
- Homeland Security investigator discussed the need to figure out what jurisdiction the trafficking occurred in and notify the associated agency in order to work out who will be the primary investigative body.
- Federal law enforcement officers indicated that local police have not allocated resources to anti-trafficking efforts, so feds are receiving most of the cases for investigative follow up.
- County Attorney's Office indicated there is no one assigned to these cases at the Sheriff's Office.
- The FBI commented on the difficulty in prosecuting sex trafficking cases.
- US Attorney's office said they use a victim/witness coordinator to support victims and indicated that they work to build a relationship of cooperation with the victim because they are needed for trafficking cases. If the case involves child pornography, the victim is not needed.
- Center for Children has a safe haven, which provides counseling and has beds at the shelter (11-17 coed), case management, and beds in the emergency shelter.
- Center Against Sexual and Family violence stated that SANE nurses are available for exams if its within 96 hours of assault but reminded the group that juveniles can refuse.
- US Attorney's Office has the potential to institute victim restitution.

WHAT COMMUNITY RESOURCES CAN WE USE THAT ARE NOT CURRENTLY BEING USED BUT COULD BE?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group felt strongly about utilizing the school environment as a resource in building awareness about sex trafficking. Training teachers, developing peer educators, and infusing health education curriculum with information about trafficking were all cited as ways to build community resiliency and create additional protective layers for kids. The group also discussed the central role faith plays for many in the area and cited the importance of including religious groups in community anti-trafficking efforts.

Paseo Del Norte currently provides prevention education in some schools, while Homeland Security Investigations delivers an I-Guardian prevention education program in some schools as well. In addition, the County Attorney's Office is actively combatting trafficking in hotels and motels by utilizing nuisance abatement laws as leverage to shut down facilities that engage criminal activities. The Texas Rural Legal Aid can provide legal assistance and is actively recruiting pro bono attorneys and working with CAST in Los Angeles to train them to work with trafficked victims.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- The role of the schools can't be underestimated. Educators and school administrators need awareness training so they can recognize indicators such as truancy and report them.
- Tap into student government and student leadership groups to create peer mentorship and peer education opportunities.
- Center of Hope gave an example of a successful peer education model at Montwood High School during sex trafficking awareness month.
- We need to create videos for teens on dating and violence.
- In-school health curriculum should include awareness about sex trafficking.
- Center for Sexual and Family Violence indicated they are currently giving community presentations and trainings.
- Faith based communities should be included more. They are currently helping by housing some of the victims.
- Paseo Del Norte has a shelter for adult victims of trafficking with four beds; victims can stay for forty-five days and receive referrals to other services.

ARE THERE BARRIERS TO MOVING FORWARD?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group discussed the importance of raising community awareness about the realities of sex trafficking. They stated that many people in the El Paso area, including residents and government officials, are in denial about the existence of sex trafficking in the area, and awareness raising and community education efforts would increase interest and enhance anti-trafficking efforts. The importance of local law enforcement commitment to trafficking prevention and intervention was discussed as a barrier to moving forward.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Need more community awareness.
- Law Enforcement needs to be proactive.
- The US Attorney's Office said that the heavy law enforcement presence in El Paso might be a barrier to investigations. They felt that everyone knows a cop, and that the chances of an offender having connections and finding out he is under investigations is high.
- A representative from the County DA's Office feels that the court process discourages victim participation because of the length of time it takes to prosecute a case.

ARE THERE PREVENTION EFFORTS CURRENTLY UNDERWAY?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The participants indicated that few prevention efforts exist. There are Internet safety trainings taking place in schools and a community-based organization is currently working to educate kids attending schools identified as high/risk and vulnerable, but overall the group believed additional prevention efforts need to be developed.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Homeland Security agents are currently tasked with presenting I-Guardian curriculum for Internet safety at school sites. They recently held training at a Gay-Straight Alliance Teen Summit in the schools.
- Center of Hope is working on prevention education at four high schools in an at risk zip code. They are also working to deliver the training to kids who are home schooled or attending charter or alternative schools.
- Center of Hope is currently working to recruit private attorneys to attend trainings in hopes of encouraging them to work at least one pro bono trafficking case (victim's rights) per year.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PIMPS AND PURCHASERS IN THIS COMMUNITY?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group indicated that purchasers come from all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, although the FBI stated that truck drivers are frequent purchasers in the area. Pimps were said to be largely gang affiliated and often connected to local adult entertainment venues and bars. Pimps were said to be involved in other crimes including drug dealing in the area. Federal law enforcement indicated many pimps are from out of state with a significant number coming from California.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- FBI agents' intelligence indicates many purchasers are truck drivers who purchase sex in El Paso and across the border in Mexico.
- Buyers come from all walks of life including military, law enforcement, and medical professionals.
- There are purchasers specifically interested in boys; LGBTQ boys often trafficked by their own community.
- Many traffickers are gang involved in El Paso.
- There are a significant number of traffickers from California who bring girls to El Paso. Sometimes the pimps do not come but send the girls alone. This shields traffickers from getting caught.
- Pimps focus on selling juveniles because they are in high demand, and if caught, they are treated as victims and not incarcerated.
- Local adult entertainment venues are run by gangs and associated with drugs and trafficking; Barrio Azteca is the largest one (FBI).
- Many bars offer the ability to visit with girls in private rooms.
- Since the shut down of several web sites, new apps such as Whisper are emerging and being utilized for trafficking.
- There are also brothels. The County Attorney's Office recently had a case involving a meth dealer selling girls and keeping them high.
- Minors often trafficked out of houses.
- Many illicit massage parlors.

WHAT WOULD AN IDEAL RESPONSE TO TRAFFICKING LOOK LIKE?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The group was clear that creating a victim-centered, wrap around, holistic model of care should be a priority. They named coordinated, trauma informed, social service response as extremely important to supporting victims of trafficking. Stable placements, family supports, educational opportunities, and peer advocates were seen as important resources to supporting victims in their healing processes. The group stated that many of the necessary resources already exist in El Paso, and that with additional trafficking training and increased provider coordination, an impactful service response model could be created.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- We would offer individualized care, placement, and focus on the child completely. We would move away from group home placements and into individual foster home type placements.
- Interventions would be therapeutic and long-term with a focus on the future, such as getting victims into a trade school.
- We would focus on training and understanding trauma and the impacts of adverse childhood experiences on vulnerable populations.
- We would provide loving, structured, stable home environments for victims and connect them to resources and services. We would have consistent mentors for victims because they get tired of telling their stories 20 times to different people within systems.
- We would have a coordinated care response with a monthly meeting so the child doesn't have to bounce around to different locations and meet with different providers.
- We would coordinate and utilize our existing resources to respond to trafficking and serve victims.
- We would offer treatment, supports, and education for families so victims could return to a healthier environment.
- We would hire survivors as peer advocates and mentors.
- We would have a community response that shames purchasers and traffickers.
- We need transitional housing for youth aging out of foster care.
- We need more involved male role models.

WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES FOR NEXT STEPS?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The participants indicated that training law enforcement and increasing their involvement in anti-trafficking efforts must be a priority in creating an impactful community response. The group said that a lack of awareness and understanding is preventing the community from responding to the issues of trafficking and believe that robust education and awareness efforts must be implemented. Creation of response protocols, resource guides, and designated interdisciplinary response teams were named as urgencies.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- Focus on identifying victims.
- Need local law enforcement to get involved.
- We need more law enforcement resources focused on this issue.
- Local law enforcement needs to be educated about trafficking including indicators of trafficking and how to identify and engage victims.
- Training for law enforcement and officer of the court needs to be mandated.
- Law enforcement need to be trained, and they need a protocol and resource guide.
- Educators and school administrators need to be trained on recognizing and responding to trafficking.
- We need to educate parents.
- We need an overall community education effort and a hotline number for people to call.
- We need to raise awareness. Our community is in denial about what is happening.
- We need a website and a hotline number.
- We have to lift the veil that this community has about what is going on. The community is proud of being one of the safest cities, and there is a perception that trafficking does not happen here. That denial is affecting us.
- Education to parents and communities; knowledge is power!
- We need to create a resource guide/response cheat sheet to help service providers and first responders. Knowing what to do feels overwhelming.
- We need to create a flowchart so everyone is on the same page about response.
- Create streamlined response.
- Create a video that is relatable as a public awareness tool.
- We need prevention efforts.
- We need to begin identifying victims early.
- We need to identify mentors for victims.
- We need to establish clear organization, a coalition, and response team. Lubbock has a model.
- We need to educate men and boys as a prevention effort.
- We need data collection models.
- We need to center the victims and be sure that we are not re-victimizing them through our processes (County District Attorney's Office).
- Community education is necessary to successful prosecutions. It takes a jury of twelve to care about the cases and hold someone responsible (County Attorney's Office).
- We need a specialized assessment of where we are as a community.
- We need an interdisciplinary approach, and we need to manage de-confliction to establish who is taking the case and getting resources to the victims.
- We need to establish aftercare for victims over 18.

ANY OTHER ISSUES OR GAPS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED?

QUESTION SUMMARY

The participants discussed the need to create stricter anti-trafficking legislation including increased penalties for offenders (pimps and purchasers) and sex offender registration requirements for those convicted of trafficking related offenses. The group indicated a need to diversify the pool of service providers with a specific need to hire diverse language speakers to communicate with an increasingly diverse population of victims. The group felt strongly about the importance of streamlining services, increasing placement options, and providing pathways out of trafficking in the form of trauma informed, holistic services and job training.

A need to increase community understanding and response to trafficking through data collection and research was also named as important as was the need to address the demand. The group felt strongly that many in the community are in denial about the pervasiveness of sex trafficking and seek to maintain the image of El Paso as one of the safest cities in America.

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- We need the ability to translate languages other than Spanish and English. Victims are being identified who speak many languages, and it is difficult to conduct the initial interview (County District Attorney's Office).
- We need to start discussing the root causes of trafficking. This will help us better identify youth who are at risk.
- We need a billboard campaign.
- We need mentorship programs for young boys.
- We need updates to legislation so that there is a higher punishment.
- We need an offender registration requirement.
- We need a focus group that asks kids about their perceptions of commercial sex and a study looking at the social and environmental factors that lead to delinquency (Juvenile Probation Department).
- First responder and criminal justice (including judges) need trauma informed trainings. Currently, there is too much victim blaming occurring in the criminal justice systems.
- Schools need to become more vigilant and proactive on the issue. Teachers and parents need training on recognition and intervention techniques.
- We need to identify appropriate foster families and make sure they have the training and supports they need.
- Also need transitional housing for youth aging out of foster care. El Paso Center for Children will have a transitional space for youth identifying as LGBTQ soon.
- Need job pathways for victims.
- We need to identify and support survivor leaders involvement.
- We need streamlined services so victims aren't bounced around.
- Need law enforcement participation on the task force.
- More specifically trained therapists.
- Directory of services available.