News
Trafficking

(GSR illustration/Olivia Bardo)

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Editor's note: *In honor of January being National Human Trafficking Prevention Month in the United States, Global Sisters Report is revisiting our previous reporting on this issue that remains relevant. Below is a story that was originally published Jan. 10, 2017.*

Sr. Gladys Leigh still thinks about two women she wrote to in prison in 2015.

The survivors of sex trafficking had been accepted into Magdalene St. Louis, a program that helps women live free from abuse, addiction and prostitution. They served 12 months in prison for prostitution, and before their release, Leigh, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet-St. Louis Province and a volunteer with Magdalene, wrote them encouraging letters. They responded, seeking assurance that they would really be living in a safe, loving place. They did not believe it was possible, Leigh said.

" 'Can it be true?' they asked me," said Leigh, 70. "I said, 'Yes, yes.' I had to convince them. That really touched my heart. It showed me what they had lived through."

The two women Leigh spoke of are among hundreds of people trafficked yearly in the United States. According to a 2012 report by the Urban Institute and Northeastern University, sex trafficking accounted for 85 percent of trafficking cases identified by law enforcement, followed by labor trafficking at 11 percent. Cases involving both labor and sex trafficking totaled 4 percent.

From January to September last year, 4,177 sex trafficking cases were reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

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The problem has become so prevalent that in 2011, President Barack Obama designated January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month. National Human Trafficking Awareness Day is observed annually on Jan. 11. And in 2015, the Vatican named Feb. 8 the International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a federal statute passed into law in 2000 by the U.S. Congress, defines sex trafficking as a commercial sex act "induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age." The definition is applicable to U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike.

"Sex trafficking is so covert," said Sr. Esther Hogan with Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, Missouri. "People are not aware. This is so hidden. The women who are trafficked are vulnerable and invisible. People need to know this."

Of the 67 congregations that are members of U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, about 25 are congregations from the Midwest. Midwestern states like Missouri have become hubs for sex trafficking because of their central location, experts say. An extensive highway and interstate system with hundreds of truck stops and rest areas make it a target location for sex trafficking.

According to the Polaris Project, one of the country's biggest anti-human-trafficking organizations, 79 sex trafficking cases were reported in Missouri in the first nine months of 2016.

"If we don't know anything about it, we can't do anything to change it," Hogan said. "How many people have heard of human trafficking? How many people know what it looks like? If we don't know what it is or what to look for, how can we help?"

Mary Mugo from Nairobi, Kenya, wears a T-shirt that reads "Pray Against Human Trafficking" as she joins other young people in Rome's central Santa Maria in Trastevere Square Feb. 6, 2024, to raise awareness about human trafficking. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Hogan's Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, members of the American Association of University Women, and the Coalition Against Trafficking and Exploitation started the St. Charles Coalition Against Human Trafficking in 2013. Hogan and her congregation have also launched the Yellow Butterfly Campaign to address human trafficking on college campuses.

Too often, sex trafficking can be identified or concealed by another crime, such as domestic abuse, said Emily Russell, victims advocate with the Missouri Sheriffs' Association.

"I deal with all kinds of situations," Russell said. "You work with someone, and you learn their parents trafficked them, or they ran away and met a pimp, or they're in a domestic violence situation. You see the manipulation. They are stuck and can't get

out. It's not that difficult to consider whether the abuser is forcing women to perform sex acts for drugs."

Remote rural communities make up much of the Midwest and make illegal activity such as sex trafficking easier to conceal. But hubs of activity also provide opportunities to traffickers. Students in the Midwest's many universities and colleges may be drawn into trafficking because they live away from home with little supervision. The need to make money to pay back student loans can become a dangerous inducement to accept what sounds like a moneymaking opportunity without fully understanding the consequences.

"Because of its central location and all the means of transportation available — planes, trains and trucks — kids can end up anywhere in the country in 36 hours from here," said Russ Tuttle with the Stop Trafficking Project and KC Street Hope in Kansas City, Missouri. "The gang level of sex trafficking is increasing [in the Midwest], as well. A trafficker can be any person who wants to exploit a child. It's a cash windfall for them, not for the child."

From left: Sr. Ruth Kurtz; Barbara Butchart, AAUW member and president of the St. Charles Coalition; and Sr. Esther Hogan (Courtesy photo)

Based in Sioux City, Iowa, Franciscan Sr. Shirley Fineran — who belongs to the Siouxland Coalition Against Human Trafficking — said those in Iowa are "probably a little bit more trusting than those in other parts of the country." She said social media tends to be a primary place where people are "groomed" for trafficking, as vulnerabilities can be exploited through connections and relationships made online.

Her goal is to open a restoration center for adult women by the fall, where she will house five to 10 women for up to two years. Fineran said the center will be a place where "women will go to heal [from] the traumatic experiences that they've had."

"We're going to help women live the rest of their lives as best they can with what they've experienced," she said. That process will include both group and individual trauma therapy, as well as helping women acquire life skills that "most of us who have had a normal development in life take for granted," such as cooking, laundry, and basic communication and problem-solving skills. If the women have children and need help regaining custody or reuniting with their kids, the center will also help them with those legal matters, Fineran said.

Fineran will not require women to attend Bible study or prayer.

"It's very important that women do not experience religious control to replace the control that they've had," she said, adding that as a Catholic sister, she supports spirituality and will offer that if the women would like it. However, "sometimes I think people can use God and religion as a control, and that can be revictimizing, in one sense."

"With our restoration center, we're not looking to return women to something that was normal, because many of them never had a normal life. It's really to help them live the rest of their lives with what they've experienced."

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How to spot trafficked individuals

As the topic of trafficking has "exploded" as an issue of interest to the public, so, too, have myths associated with the crime, said Bailey Patton Brackin, assistant director at Wichita State University's Center for Combating Human Trafficking. Though there are cases where someone might be grabbed off the street and taken somewhere to be trafficked, she said, that's a small portion of what trafficking cases look like.

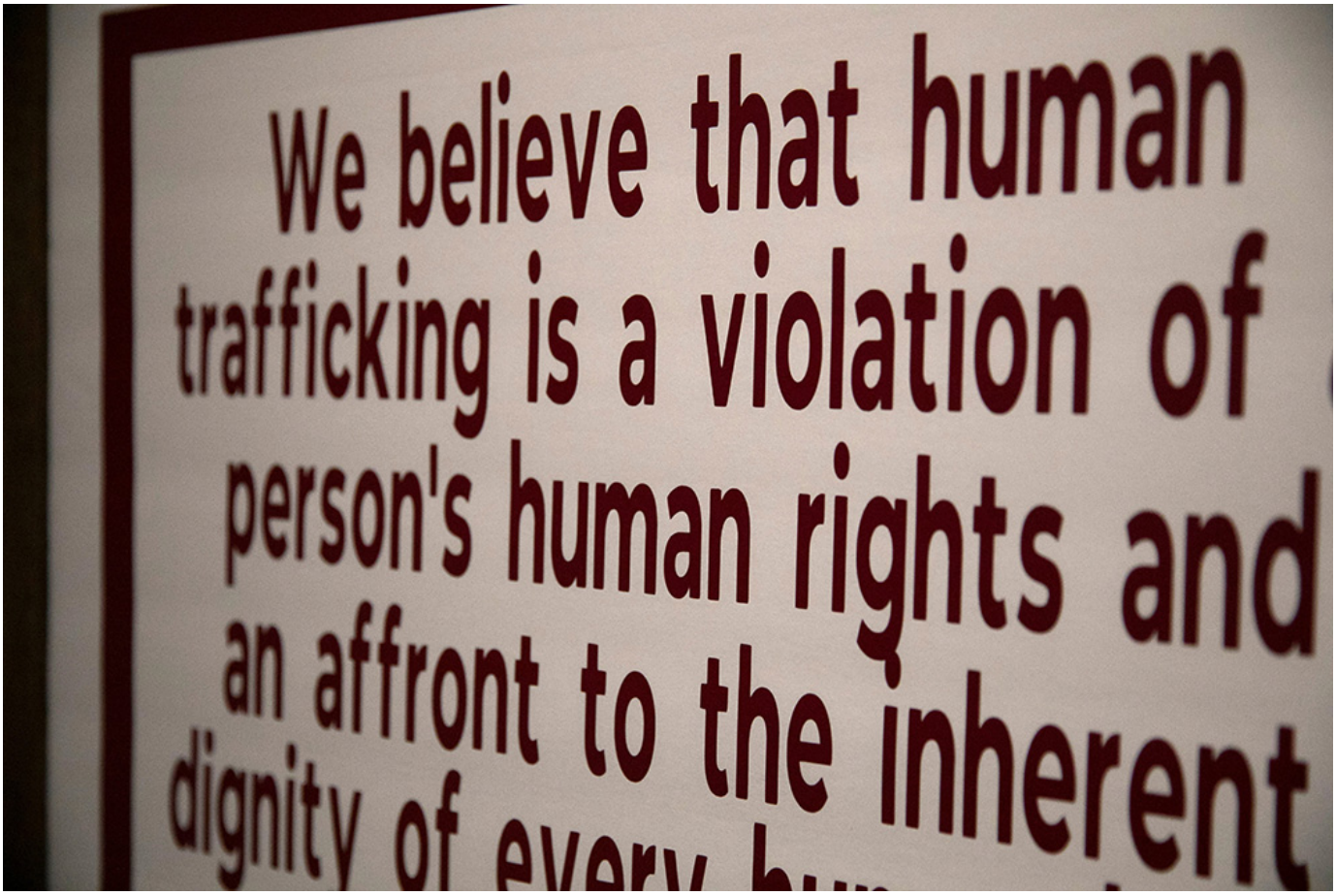
"All cases are so unique, but most commonly, we're talking about a person who is exploited through an understanding of one of their vulnerabilities," Brackin said. "Oftentimes, a trafficker ends up building a relationship with a young person by finding out what they're missing in their life. Someone involved in foster care who doesn't have a family to rely on — that's a vulnerability where the trafficker can exploit and say, 'I'll provide that for you, I'll be that person.' It tends to be more of an involved process rather than someone who is picked up instantly and trafficked."

Traffickers often share a background of past trauma, she added, such as being involved with state custody, abuse in their own home, or an early exposure to drugs and alcohol. "The risk factors mirror; it's just that one becomes the exploiter, and one becomes the exploited."

Tuttle of the Stop Trafficking Project blamed much of the trafficking trade on online advertisements for sex. A 2013 study conducted in 15 metropolitan city areas by Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research found that one out of every 20 men over the age of 18 was soliciting sex through online ads. The findings ranged from one out of every five men in Houston to less than one of 166 men in San Francisco.

"The demand is high," Tuttle said. "There's a need to educate people on what's going on on the demand side. They don't understand the ramifications in our area, the tragic and heartbreaking stories."

Sisters of multiple congregations throughout the Midwest are trying to fill those voids in education.



A sign on human trafficking is seen at the Motel X interactive exhibit at the National Underground Freedom Center in Cincinnati Jan. 10, 2020. (OSV News/The Enquirer via Reuters/Liz Dufour)

In Belleville, Kansas, St. Joseph Sr. Margaret Nacke — who founded the Bakhita Initiative and later the coalition U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking — visits hospitals and motels, informing staff members of red flags indicating a trafficked individual:

- An inconsistent or scripted history or rehearsed responses;
- Unaware of the current city;
- Few or no possessions;
- A striking age differential between the guests (for example, a young woman accompanied by an older man);
- Possesses items he or she can't afford or is carrying large amounts of cash;
- Lives with his or her employer.

Like Nacke, Humility Sr. Anne Victory is working to educate hospital staffs throughout Cleveland. Law enforcement and social services had mentioned to her that hospitals should know what to do when confronted with a trafficked victim because the hospital is often a victim's first stop.

When a nurse told Victory that she thinks hospitals treat trafficking victims but don't know how to handle the situation, Victory, a trained nurse and educator, decided to put together a one-hour film for health care facilities in the area, "Guidelines for Treating Human Trafficking Victims: A Resource for Northeast Ohio," with the help of university hospitals and Sisters of Charity health systems.

Because trafficking survivors are sometimes forced into drug addictions so traffickers can more easily keep them under control, they have to recover from both the trauma of being trafficked and the addiction. The survivor in the film that Victory helped produce was one such case.

Already, 600 people have seen the film, and Victory, who is the education coordinator for the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking, is working to fulfill requests across the country for similar versions of this film, which is currently specific to the region.

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>
> — Bailey Patton Brackin
>
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Next on her radar is educating school staffs and those in immigration refugee communities, which have "particular needs and cultural understandings."

"The thing is, if you've seen one [case of trafficking], you've seen one," she said. "There are similarities, but every situation is different, and every situation is tragic. ... There's a need to listen to them, to hear what they perceive their needs to be rather just presume we know."

'Maybe they will remember what love was'

Christine McDonald, 48, an advocate for sex-trafficking survivors in the St. Louis area, was trafficked both as a teenager and as an adult. She said too many people think trafficking happens overseas and involves international kidnapping rather than focusing on incidents closer to home.

McDonald was a 15-year-old runaway when a man gave her a job selling flowers in Oklahoma bars in the mid-1980s. He gave her a room and a fake ID. She calls this period "being groomed."

After a few weeks, the man left her with another man who owned strip clubs. Only later would McDonald realize she had been sold.

The second man "tested the goods" — raped her. He had McDonald dance in the clubs and he took what she earned. She relied on him for a place to stay. She began using drugs to prepare herself for what would happen after she had danced and was given to men for sex. Once she became addicted, she stayed to be able to get more drugs.

"What was I to do? Where was I to go?" McDonald said. "Call the police? Trafficking was not even a term then. You have guilt and shame. You're trafficked before you are an adult, but then you turn 18 and prostitution is a crime, so now you're a criminal. That becomes a jacket that prevents you from getting legitimate work, a place to live, a new life."

A group including students from Sacred Heart Academy and Presentation Academy in Louisville, Ky., attend a prayer service for victims of human trafficking in 2019 in downtown Louisville. (OSV News/CNS file/The Record/Ruby Thomas)

For a survivor to even discuss trafficking carries risks of further exploitation by people who mean well, McDonald said.

"For some people, a survivor's only value is in their story," McDonald said. "It makes it that much harder to move beyond being a survivor and creates a kind of voyeurism."

Today, McDonald is the program director of Restoration House of Greater Kansas City, which assists survivors of sex trafficking by offering shelter and counseling. The house provides for physical needs, and offers trauma and addiction therapy, education and job skill training, all intended to help victims heal and acquire the resources they need to lead fulfilling lives.

Following her 2013 memoir, Cry Purple, McDonald wrote a book to challenge the assumptions and misconceptions often associated with trafficking survivors: The Same Kind of Human: Seeing the Marginalized and Exploited Through the Eyes of Grace.

Leigh, the volunteer with Magdalene St. Louis, has worked with McDonald. She said McDonald's stories and the stories she has heard from other survivors are "eye- and heart-opening."

In 2011, Leigh began volunteering with The Covering House, a St. Louis nonprofit that helps sexually exploited girls through counseling, shelter and other supportive services.

One 13-year-old girl in particular stands out. Leigh and the girl watched movies together. One movie prompted Leigh to say that the lead character had a marshmallow heart.

The girl asked Leigh what kind of heart she had.

"You have the same," Leigh said, "but one covered with chocolate." The girl understood that to mean that the chocolate was a shield to protect her heart.

She had reason to protect it, Leigh said. The girl loved her mother and "would have given anything to hear her say, 'I love you.' " But the mother would not or could not. Leigh will never know.

Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, with white hair, attends the White House Advisory Council for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in 2013. (Courtesy photo)

Leigh saw the mother in court for a hearing on the girl's custody case one afternoon. The mother did not want her daughter. The girl called to her. Her mother ignored her. The girl called to her again, and again the mother ignored her.

"Mom, can you hear me?" the girl shouted.

Still the mother ignored her. After the hearing, the girl, holding Leigh's hand, ran after her mother. "Go away," Leigh recalled the mother saying. "Go away." The girl wept.

"I am learning not to be judgmental," Leigh said. "I won't judge the mother. The mother was very petite. She looked almost like another child to me."

Leigh does not know what happened to the girl. She was gone one weekend when Leigh came for her volunteer shift.

"I don't ask questions," she said. "I pray for those who leave. Maybe they will come back. Maybe they will remember what love was and be willing to try again for a new life instead of remaining in the old life, the only life they've known."

The importance of human dignity

Driving through Toledo, Ohio, at night, Notre Dame Sr. Francis Marie Penwell would scout the streets with a few sisters, looking for lone, potentially trafficked women.

"One time, we met a girl who told us that we saved her life that day because we stopped. We not only stopped, but we said, 'What can we do for you?' " Penwell said. "She later said, 'I've been on the streets for 13 years, and not one person has ever reached out and said, "What can I do for you?" until that day.' It moved our hearts, too, knowing that that whole day of going out, we only reached one person, but that person was very vital when it came to needs."

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Penwell is involved with Rahab's Heart, a resource in Toledo for women trapped in prostitution. About 10 women invited from the streets join the biweekly dinners and share their stories, the others "reaching out or just listening to their needs."

The trafficked women "can relax there; they're not on the jobs," she said. One time, Penwell brought a friend to join the women at Rahab's Heart for dinner, and her friend couldn't tell the volunteers apart from the trafficked women.

People often don't think about human dignity when they think about these types of problems in the world, said Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck, who started the Task Force to Eradicate Modern Slavery in 2013. Weisenbeck, who lives in La Crosse, Wisconsin, was asked to participate in the White House Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in 2012.

She was instrumental in enlisting Wisconsin senators to co-sponsor a supply-chain transparency bill in 2015, currently pending at the federal level, that would require multimillion-dollar corporations to state in their annual reports whether their products are the result of forced labor. Another bill required the investigation of child abuse reports, which said children who are engaged in prostitution should be immediately considered trafficked individuals.

" 'Blessed are those who care of the prisoners,' and human trafficking victims are definitely prisoners because their freedom has been taken away; others are controlling their lives completely," Weisenbeck said.

"The Holy Spirit works through people, and we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit through the voices of those who suffer."