

Report says California is prime target for human trafficking

SAN FRANCISCO – Outreach efforts to victims of human trafficking were given new impetus by a recent California task force report that said the state is a prime target for trade in human beings.

Irina Goldenshteyn, a case manager for Refugee and Immigrant Services of the San Francisco Archdiocese's Catholic Charities program, said many people don't even realize they are victims.

"They think it's supposed to be like that," she told Catholic San Francisco, newspaper of the archdiocese. "They don't know there's any other way."

A report released Dec. 4 by the California Alliance to Combat Trafficking and Slavery said the state's international border, numerous ports and airports, soaring immigrant population and growing economy all contribute to California being a prime target for human trafficking.

It said that, beyond the sex trade, labor trafficking includes farming, construction, clothing manufacturing, domestic work, restaurants and the motel/hotel industry.

It cited a study by the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, which reported that 57 forced labor operations were uncovered between 1998 and 2003 in a dozen California cities, involving more than 500 people from 18 countries.

In San Francisco, local advocates fear widespread abuse among domestic workers and farmworkers. They said undocumented workers are particularly at risk from employers who take advantage of their lack of education and sense of powerlessness.

Goldenshteyn said she hopes to recruit priests and nuns to reach out to victims and to provide other assistance.

For instance, parishes are being asked to have emergency housing available on short

notice, the first component in protecting victims and starting legal action against traffickers.

She explained that a place of long-term refuge can be crucial in labor trafficking cases, which are harder to prove than sex trafficking cases. This is partly due to victims' economic dependence on their abusers.

Goldenshteyn said neighbors and fellow parishioners also could play a role in combating trafficking. Often trafficking is happening in plain sight, but can be difficult to detect, she said.

She said she recently interviewed a young Central American woman who was referred to Catholic Charities by a federal agency as a potential victim of trafficking or domestic violence. It was difficult to separate the two.

"The look in her eyes ... it was nothing specific," Goldenshteyn said. "She spoke in Spanish and was very positive, but the look in her eyes ... (showed she was) looking for protection."

The experience convinced Goldenshteyn that more should be done to reach out to labor trafficking victims.

"I was scared that millions of people would be exploited the same way and wouldn't be able to have help, or would be deported, or wouldn't have the guts to tell it," she said.

Kay Buck, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, said Asians are the most numerous labor trafficking victims, followed by people from Latin America.

Mexico and Guatemala are notorious sources of victims, who are typically domestic or sweatshop workers. Buck said she suspects there is much underreported trafficking in the agriculture industry.

"In general this crime is underreported for reasons of fear," she said. "Traffickers not only threaten the victims but also their families back home. They'll threaten to kill the children. We haven't had cases where they'll murder their kids but we have

had cases where they'll burn their houses down and intimidate the families."

With the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, Congress adopted measures to hold foreign governments accountable and doubled the prison sentence for federal trafficking. It also created a new type of visa for victims who cooperate with law enforcement and face peril if forced to return home.

But recently, lawmakers have been hearing advocates' pleas that more be done to provide legal protection and social services to the estimated 17,500 victims trafficked into the United States each year.

In September, Bishop Gerald R. Barnes of San Bernardino, then-chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, lamented the lack of public education on the problem.

"Humane responses have remained slow," he said in a statement. "The global community, including the United States, is only beginning to comprehend the scope and impact of selling human persons in the world."