

NEWS

Fears of human trafficking stoked by Carlee Russell are distorted, Well House CEO says

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Carolyn Potter, CEO of the Well House, said recent publicity on the issue has distorted the reality of human trafficking. The Well House currently is providing housing and programs for about eight children and 22 women who have been victims of human trafficking. (Photo courtesy of The Well House)





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By [Greg Garrison | ggarrison@al.com](#)

Reports last week of a Hoover woman who reported seeing a child in a diaper unattended on the side of I-459, who then stopped her car on the shoulder to check on the child, then disappeared for days, stoked fears of human trafficking and child endangerment that have run rampant on social media.

The case made national news and left Hoover residents and others worried about their safety. [Hoover Police Chief Nick Derzis released more details on the case](#) Wednesday and tried to put peoples' minds at ease, saying there was no danger to public safety.

Carolyn Potter, CEO of [The Well House](#), a Christian home in Odenville for women and children that has helped victims of human trafficking the past 13 years, said [what Carlee Russell reported](#) is far out of the norm of real trafficking cases.

What's publicly known so far from police about the incident reported by Russell, who returned home on Saturday, is not like the cases the Well House handles, she said.

The Well House currently is providing housing and programs for about eight children and 22 women who have been victims of human trafficking, she said.

"About half of those children were trafficked by their families," Potter said. About half the children staying at The Well House are from Alabama, and others are usually from surrounding states, she said.

"The things that are sensationalized like this are not what we see in human trafficking," Potter said. "It's entirely possible that someone would use a child to lure someone into a situation, but think about this. It's late at night, in the dark. Who is really going to stop? There are no white vans pulling up snatching kids and throwing them in ... I'm afraid we get too wound up in the sensationalism of things and we miss what's right under our noses. We miss the fact that there are families trafficking their children for drugs and for other reasons. There are intimate partners that are trafficking their partner. There's the internet and social media, that's probably the top means right now that traffickers are using to lure people. Most of the time they know their trafficker."

Potter praised the sensitivity with which the case has been handled by the Hoover Police. "This is not the norm," she said. "You can't ever just ignore it. Human trafficking is happening. It is happening in our communities."

About 40 percent of trafficking victims are lured in by the internet and through social media, she said.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security says that in fiscal 2022 the agency identified and or rescued 1,170 child victims through its Child Exploitation Investigations Unit, and arrested 4,459 people for crimes involving sexual exploitation of children, with more than 2,147 convictions.

Commercial sex is estimated to be a \$110 million industry in the Birmingham metropolitan area, according to Doug Gilmer, an agent with Homeland Security Investigations. That does not include child sex trafficking or illegal massage parlors.

But [Gilmer told AL.com in a previous interview](#) that law enforcement can point to no one in Alabama who was kidnapped and sold into sex trafficking. "Most of the national research that's been done indicates that less than one percent of people who are kidnapped are actually kidnapped for the purposes of human trafficking, being sold into sex trafficking here in the U.S.," Gilmer said.

Regardless of the outcome in the Hoover case, there are lessons to be learned, Potter said.

"It doesn't matter what age you are, what sex you are, do not stop on the side of the road in the middle of the night, and I'm not even sure during the day," Potter said. "Just call the police

immediately. You can't be too cautious. Even if it's not trafficking, horrible things can still happen. I would have been afraid that she would have been hit by one of those vehicles that were flying down the interstate."

If anyone ever does feel compelled to stop on the shoulder of an interstate highway, extreme caution should be taken, she said.

"If you feel the need to stop, stay in your vehicle on the phone with law enforcement," she said. "Just call 911 and report what you see. If nothing else comes from this, be careful, be cautious, stay in your car, stay on your phone, make sure law enforcement is informed."

The issue of human trafficking is often over-sensationalized, as in the Russell case, she said.

"Trafficking is real but that is not typically the scenario we see," Potter said. "It does happen. People are kidnapped. That is not the typical scenario in the rescues and survivors we see."

There is currently a hit movie starring Jim Caviezel in movie theaters, "The Sound of Freedom," that portrays a former U.S. federal agent who rescues child victims of international human trafficking. Potter has seen the movie and emphasizes that it's not a documentary.

"It was overdramatized, probably because it is a movie," Potter said. "That's what you'd expect from a movie. We're glad they put the message out there. We're glad it's raising more awareness on human trafficking. It should be noted that for whatever reason we're just ignoring what's happening at the

border where these kids are being brought across, and they're just disappearing into the interior of the U.S. We know that some of that is human trafficking, whether it be labor trafficking or sex trafficking. Hopefully we'll shine a light on that as well."

The Well House has housed more than 600 women and children and referred hundreds of others to other resources over the past 13 years, Potter said. "Their healing journey is a lifetime, but we know they can get to a healthy place so they can start living a normal life. That's our goal."

[For full coverage of the Carlee Russell case, click here.](#)