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WellHouse director speaks about human trafficking

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Forty percent of human trafficking in the U.S. occurs in the southeastern states. In Alabama, I-65, I-20 and I-59 each serve as major corridors for the \$150-billion industry.

It was on this topic that Carolyn Potter, executive director of The WellHouse in Birmingham, came to speak Thursday at Summit Crossing Community Church in Athens. Tina Cook of the Family Resource Center invited Potter to Limestone County after hearing her speak at a conference in Tuscaloosa.

Potter said when she first started with The WellHouse, it was rare to see more than a few hands raised when she asked a crowd if anyone knew of human trafficking.

"I see tonight there are many, many more, and that means awareness has been raised and more people are aware of what is going on," she said.

Potter explained some of the methods used to entice potential victims and keep them in trafficking. This included convincing victims they are loved or cared for by their traffickers in ways other people won't be able to care or love them and keeping necessary documents out of their control.

"A trafficker is not going to let them hold onto a Social Security card, a driver's license and an ID or birth certificate," Potter said. "They're gonna take that, and then you've lost your identity."

She also went over common places and methods used to traffick the girls, such as the use of social media sites like Snapchat and the use of hotels.

"It's hard to stay at a hotel now without wondering if it was used as a human trafficking source," Potter said.

Human trafficking occurs all over the world, with the average age of female entry into trafficking being 12–14 years old, Potter said. They have a general life expectancy of 7–10 years in the industry, where traffickers can make \$150,000–\$200,000 per female each year, she said.

"Our girls come from all over the United States," Potter said of the victims at The WellHouse. "On any given day, we'll probably be 40 percent from Alabama and the rest from other states or other countries."

The WellHouse currently has 24 beds in its program for victims and aids adult female victims only. Potter said they plan to expand to 38 beds soon and one day provide services to minors.

It is unknown if males would be included in these plans. In a 2008 study of commercially sexually exploited children in New York, almost half were boys. A review of prostitution arrests of those under age 18 in 2009 found 1 in 5 to be male.

Entering The WellHouse

Potter said women who enter The WellHouse can undergo three levels of treatment — a 90-day program called "The Immediate Shelter," up to 12 months in the "Next Steps to Freedom" and another year in The WellHouse's transitional shelter.

While women are not required to attend each level, Potter said the levels offer them the chance to receive therapy, mentoring, job and life skills training, a place to live, education and more. The center is "a Christ-based, faith-based center" and Potter credited devotion to faith as a key part of the transition.

"There's a real noticeable difference in a young lady that goes to NSF than the young ladies that are still in TIS," she said. "... We are a Christ-centered organization, and our ladies will tell you the difference is in the faith."

Through a partnership with Jefferson State College in Birmingham, Potter said they are able to offer college courses to the victims in their program. Women must be in school, working or both to live in the transitional shelter.

Founding troubles

The WellHouse found itself in the headlines earlier this year when human trafficking victim and founder of The Wellhouse, Tajuan McCarty, was arrested in a drug raid in Tarrant. McCarty was one of three arrested, and she was charged with trafficking cocaine, trafficking stolen identities, two counts of fraudulent use of a debit/credit card and possession of a controlled substance.

Potter said it was a "really, really sad incident."

"She was in the news because she was a victim herself and her healing hadn't happened completely," Potter said. "So there was a relapse, and yeah, it was really sad for us."

"It's been quite some time since she's been involved with The WellHouse, but we love her and we are looking for God to restore and can't wait for that day," she said.