

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

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THE STAR'S EDITORIAL

To stamp out human trafficking, authorities need more effective training

Set free the victims of modern slavery

Slavery still haunts this country, including instances here in Kansas City.

That was clear in The Kansas City Star's five-day series, "Human Trafficking in America."

The series, which ended Thursday, exposed the horrors of contemporary indentured servitude. It must be a call to action, for Congress, the president, state and local governments, police forces and every individual who opposes human rights abuses.

While the United States points fingers globally at nations for failing to do enough to end human trafficking, our own poorly enforced laws and cumbersome bureaucracy often mean America does worse in preventing and dealing with the practices than many of the nations it criticizes.

The series showed that while this issue is clearly international in scope, it's also very local. The largest suspected human trafficking ring ever uncovered by U.S. law enforcement was based in Kansas City.

For almost a decade, three companies and 12 accused human traffickers allegedly took advantage of a guest worker visa program that is easy to defraud.

It's hard to grasp that in 2009 actual slaves were cleaning Kansas City hotel rooms, work-

ing in area restaurants, serving as housecleaners and being forced into prostitution.

Some attempt to "blame the victim," arguing that these slaves were trapped while trying to illegally enter this country. The tragedy of human bondage in modern America though cannot be accepted for any individual, regardless of status. Fighting illegal immigration is a problem. Eliminating slavery is a moral imperative.

And while it's vile in any nation, it is more reprehensible here. This nation, unlike any other in the history of the world, was formed to honor the self-evident truth that "All men are created equal."

This nation outlawed slavery after the Civil War.

Today's modern version, of course, differs from that of the past. Instead of slave ships there are commercial flights or trips across the porous U.S.-Mexican border.

There are no public auctions of human beings. Instead, those auctions are held in private. It is hard to know which is more appalling, that one set of humans sells off another, or that another set of humans is willing to buy.

As the series by three reporters revealed, poor, desperate individuals are trapped into bondage. In many cases, they approach someone to help them find a better life in the

United States, believing they will arrive, legally, to clean homes or work in a particular business. Instead, they arrive to be told that they have incurred a large amount of debt, and that they will have to do the bidding of those who brought them for years to repay it. They are bought and sold. Their forced labor, even prostitution, only deepens the debt to their "sponsor (owner)."

And for a final indignity, when (or if) their captors are finally caught and arrested, these victims are arrested along with them.

Post-arrest they are frequently stuffed onto deportation flights back to their home countries, and even drugged so they'll be quiet on the flights, where they may again face the gangs that first ensnared them.

Four critical suggestions from the series must be followed.

1 The United States must find ways to locate and free more victims. This requires better training for police, and a public better educated to recognize the problem.

2 Work visa program rules must be strengthened to crack down on fraud.

3 A better-coordinated search must begin for victims. Agencies must work together to avoid re-victimizing those already suffering.

4 Law enforcement officers

must be relieved of conflicts that expect them to both arrest illegal immigrants and identify victims, two jobs that don't go together well. And police must be trained to elicit information from frightened, reluctant victims.

Flor, a Mexican immigrant trapped into indentured servitude said: "I thought slaves were only in the past, just in history. It happens every day."

It shouldn't:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." — 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified Dec. 6, 1865.



THE STAR'S HUMAN TRAFFICKING PROJECT TEAM

Earlier this year, when a massive federal indictment revealed that Kansas City had become a hub for trafficking, three reporters began investigating America's track record on this growing international human rights problem.

The stories took reporters and a photographer from crowded Guatemalan migrant shelters to the deadly streets of Tijuana, Mexico.

Reporters also spent six months conducting hundreds of interviews and reviewing thousands of pages of court documents, as well as government records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

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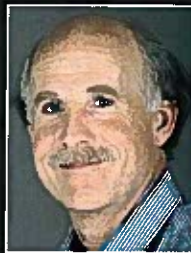
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Don Munday edited the copy. Greg Branson, Hector Casanova and Dave Eames produced the graphics; Charles Gooch designed the pages.

PROTECTING THE VICTIMS

In researching the series, Kansas City Star reporters conducted hundreds of interviews with human trafficking experts, government officials, prosecutors and law enforcement officers across the United States.

They sought out survivors of modern-day slavery, many of whom were reluctant to discuss their experiences. In every case, the newspaper followed ground rules suggested by anti-trafficking advocates in an effort to avoid re-trau-

matizing them.

In some cases, the newspaper withheld the names of survivors, or showed only a portion of their faces in photographs, in order to protect them from violent traffickers, some of whom remain at large. Some survivors, however, didn't object to having their photos published as long as their full names weren't disclosed.

Scenes in the Hostage House stories were based on extensive interviews with those involved in the trafficking case.