

Viewpoints: Human trafficking hotlines save lives

By [Claire Lipschultz](#)

Special to The Bee

Published: Saturday, Jan. 25, 2014 - 12:00 am

I am still haunted by the image of a very young woman I saw several years ago. She is dressed in baggy sweats, her bedroom slippers flapping, her loose ponytail on top of her head, askew. She seems dazed as she is pulled across a busy street by a man talking on his cellphone. He looks around furtively and then pushes the girl into the back seat of an expensive black car which has pulled to the curb. The car, driven by an older man, disappears into the urban traffic. I did nothing, not knowing whom to contact about a situation that just did not seem right. Today, I would call the National Trafficking Hotline phone number, where trained staff are available 24/7 to respond to my concern about this young woman.

The crime of human trafficking flourishes from lack of community awareness of activities that are often hidden in plain sight. It preys on the vulnerability of the victims, which is fed by youth, fear, coercion and lack of choices. This year the news reported horrific accounts of children being sold for sex, and workers held captive by employers. Just last week a 14-year-old girl in [Union City](#) in the [Bay Area](#), forced to work as a prostitute, tipped off detectives about a sex-trafficking ring.

These stories are not unique. Sex trafficking of women and children continues to grow at an alarming rate in the United States. It is a low-risk, high-reward business that occurs behind closed doors. There is little available data; lack of coordinated foster care, social welfare, educational, medical and [law enforcement](#) services; and an overwhelming lack of public awareness of the magnitude of the issue.

January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, and it presents an opportunity for the California business community to actively join in the fight against modern day slavery. In 2012, the National Council of Jewish Women California section sponsored a bill, now law, that requires certain businesses to post in public view two hotline help numbers, one operated by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center and the other by the California Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking.

This past April the California attorney general's office made available model notices for businesses to download and post. Mandated businesses include rest areas, truck stops, transportation hubs, job recruitment centers, farm labor contractors, establishments selling alcohol, adult entertainment venues, certain massage parlors, [hospital emergency rooms](#) and urgent care centers, among other places where trafficked victims and members of the public might see the hotline number. The real impact of posting this lifeline to safety depends on the

compliance by business within the spirit and letter of the notice law. Yet, since April there have been very few sightings of the notices.

To educate businesses about their legal responsibility to post the hotline numbers and to enlist their help in fighting human trafficking, local groups around the state are launching initiatives in their communities. Task forces of city and county officials, law enforcement, survivor groups, women's groups, [service providers](#), and faith and other community based organizations have come together to disseminate notices to businesses in their areas by mail and in person.

Scores of volunteers are being trained to visit the businesses, educate them about human trafficking and its indicators and provide copies of the hotline number notice. News conferences and press releases about the initiative are bringing the issue of human trafficking to the attention of the public, which has a vital role to play in identifying suspicious situations. These task forces understand that local action is needed to stem this global problem.

In states that have similar posting laws, national human trafficking hotlines have experienced a significant increase in calls after implementation. The calls were from concerned community members who had a hunch that something was wrong and from the victims, or survivors, themselves. These hotlines have saved lives in other states, and they can do the same in California.

It takes all of us to fight the heinous crime of human trafficking. Businesses that are required by law to post must do so. Other public places, especially where teens and young adults gather, such as malls, schools and recreation centers, should consider posting the hotline notice as well. Community members must educate themselves about the indicators of human trafficking and pay attention. And when in doubt, call. It can be the difference between freedom and slavery.

Claire Lipschultz, an attorney who lives in Carmichael, is a State Policy Advocate for the National Council of Jewish Women.