

Human trafficking

Firefighters lend eyes and ears to spot and report abuse

By KARIN MARK AND LEN GARIS

While inspecting a business, you come across a filthy mattress on the floor in a back room and meet an Asian worker who can't speak English and is wearing little more than rags.

When you attend a medical call at a home, the nanny can't tell you anything about the neighbourhood and clearly grows fearful when the homeowner arrives.

These may be signs of human trafficking, a growing problem in Canada and around the world. Victims of human trafficking are tricked or coerced into leaving their homes, and are then controlled and exploited in a new location, which could be in the same city or in a different country.

It's a problem that has generally been considered to be beyond the purview of fire crews. But more and more, fire departments are realizing they can add value to the service they provide to their communities by simply observing and reporting the disturbing things their staff see in the course of their duties.

For example, Surrey Fire Service in B.C. has introduced HomeSafe, a fire safety and prevention program that uses home safety inspections, fire-setter intervention and public education to reduce house fires. HomeSafe also trains firefighters to identify the signs of senior and child abuse or neglect – and as of early 2010, human trafficking.

"Firefighters are skilled and credible observers, and with a bit of training we can help identify and refer cases of human trafficking to the proper authorities," Surrey Fire Chief Len Garis said. "It's adding value to what we do, as public servants. It's another way we can help improve public safety in our community."

In Canada, the RCMP's Border Integrity Program has six regional Immigration and Passport sections, through which officers investigate human trafficking offences under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and other legislation.



Accurate statistics are difficult to verify, given the covert nature of human trafficking. RCMP Const. Caroline Raymond, Human Trafficking Co-ordinator for the Pacific Region, said Canada sees both domestic and international human trafficking each year, in three general categories:

- domestic servitude (nannies, maids, slaves),
- forced labour (in factories, farms or businesses), and
- sexual exploitation (prostitution in illicit massage parlours).

“It’s a growing market — unlike weapons and drugs, you can re-sell humans over and over,” Raymond noted. “We have to be aware of that crime as well. It’s out there and we can’t deny it.”

Raymond worked with Surrey Fire Service to train its more than 360 firefighters to identify the signs of human trafficking, and what to do if they see them.

“Firemen are out there and exposed to the community,” she said. “The more people who are aware of this crime, the better able

we are as a community to combat that. We consider them as partners.”

With respect to the training they received from Raymond, the firefighters’ role is solely to observe and report suspected cases to professionals with experience dealing with victims of human trafficking, who initially may not want help. For example, many fear authority because the police and government are corrupt in their homelands. Some fear deportation or retribution. Some don’t even realize they are victims, because they were slaves in a country where that practice is common.

After making their reports, the firefighters can rest assured that help is available for the victims. Within days, Citizenship and Immigration Canada will issue a Temporary Resident Permit, as long as it sees the potential for human trafficking. Temporary Resident Permits include health benefits and work permits, and are valid for six months — with the possibility of being extended to five years. The victims need never testify against their oppressors.

TAKING ACTION: What to look for

Victims of human trafficking can be any age, race or gender. Signs of human trafficking are more subtle than what is portrayed in movies, says RCMP Const. Caroline Raymond, human trafficking co-ordinator for the Pacific region. Most of the victims are not kidnapped, but are either deceived or coerced into leaving their homes.

Signs of human trafficking include people who:

- are being controlled by threats, however subtle;
- fear for their safety or that of loved ones;
- have bruises or other signs of abuse;
- speak little or no English;
- aren’t familiar with their own neighbourhoods or don’t know where they are;
- have been tattooed or branded;
- are deprived of necessities such as medical care, food or adequate clothing;
- are not free to come and go as they please;
- may appear to be free to come and go, but are being controlled by threats;
- are working under unreasonable conditions;
- do not speak for themselves; someone else speaks on their behalf.

What to do:

If you see signs of human trafficking, inconspicuously observe as many details as possible and report them to your local police using the key words “potential human trafficking” or to one of the RCMP Human Trafficking Co-ordination Centres:

- National Capital Region: 613-952-4200
- Ontario Region: 1-800-387-0020
- Quebec Region: 1-866-227-2124
- Atlantic Region (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I., Newfoundland and Labrador): 1-888-270-2266
- Pacific Region (B.C. and Yukon): 604-598-5306
- North West Region: (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, N.W.T. and Nunavut): 403-699-2680

Do not attempt to intervene.

More information:

More information on human trafficking can be found at www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/imm-passp or, in B.C., the Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons website at www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/octip.

Information about the Surrey Fire Service’s HomeSafe program can be found at www.surrey.ca

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Photos from RCMP and government of Canada human trafficking information being distributed to first responders in British Columbia. First responders are being taught to recognize the signs of human trafficking and report indications of human trafficking to police.

The RCMP Immigration and Passport sections are also connected with non-government and government agencies that provide assistance with paperwork, legal issues, shelter and other needs.

Garis said the training offered to his crews in conjunction with the HomeSafe program has been well received, and noted that the firefighters are cognizant that their role is simply to observe and report.

Larry Thomas, president of the Surrey Fire Fighters Association (Local 1271), said the program demonstrates that firefighters are an integral part of the public safety network.

"We have 67 people on duty every day 24/7/365 – that's a lot of eyes and ears," Thomas said. "We have a duty to the community we serve to alert the proper authorities so these problems can be addressed. As firefighters we support that. We want safe communities."

Lorne West, IAFF 6th District vice-pres-

ident and a captain with Surrey Fire Service, said the training gives firefighters the tools they need to respond when they do see, hear and sense something that concerns them.

"It's not squirting water on the hot stuff, and it's not putting a Band-Aid on a wound, but it is a safety issue in the community," West said. "The feedback I'm hearing from the average firefighter on the fire truck is that this is a great idea – why didn't it happen earlier?"

Raymond said the RCMP has been increasing its focus on community outreach, education and training regarding human trafficking in the past couple of years. In addition to firefighters, she has trained hospital staff, paramedics and other professionals who may come in contact with human trafficking victims.

"We'd like to be partners and coaches and resources for emergency responders," she said.

Karin Mark is a B.C.-based writer and graphic designer, and former award-winning journalist. Len Garis is the Fire Chief for the City of Surrey, British Columbia, and an adjunct professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley.

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