

Truckers' help sought to find human traffickers

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An Ottawa group is targeting truckers to help battle back against human trafficking.

The pilot project, TruckSTOP, is the first of its kind in Canada and may roll out across the country this fall.

Organizers say truckers, who drive the same routes and highways as victims are shuttled along, are an untapped resource.

"Truck drivers are the eyes and ears on the road," said Kim Howson with PACT Ottawa.

"They may be witnessing human trafficking every day and not even know it."

The initiative aims to educate truckers to watch out for signs of suspected trafficking victims, based a on a similar program in the United States, Truckers against Human Trafficking, which has had success.

Anti-trafficking organizations and police say human trafficking is a major and growing concern, although it is difficult to quantify.

Trafficking in connection with the sex trade is the main aspect police in Ottawa see but other forms include forced labour or child begging.

Barriers around language, a lack of reporting or the underground aspect of the crime pose challenges for law enforcement.

Police say victims sometimes do not even identify themselves as such.

"It is a big problem," said Ottawa police Insp. Uday Jaswal. "It's such a difficult issue to get a grasp on."

Jaswal said police regularly receive information about suspected trafficking and a couple of cases are now before the courts.

As of October, there have been nine human trafficking convictions under the Criminal Code of Canada, according to the RCMP Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, including one from Gatineau, where in 2008 a 28-year-old woman was charged with trafficking teen sex slaves.

Traffickers often target vulnerable people, such as immigrants or teenage runaways, at places like shelters or simply the streets.

PACT members are on the road, driving from Ottawa to Kingston on Thursday, as part of their run to distribute about 4,000 compact discs at truck and rest stops throughout Ontario by the end of the summer. A French version will also be distributed in the next month.

Pending a positive review in the fall, the program may roll out nationally.

The compact disc includes an audio component explaining signs of suspected trafficking victims, such as people who appear afraid, tired, confused or malnourished.

Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes in the world, say police, and shows no signs of slowing down.

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