News Articles

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GOVERNOR CUOMO ANNOUNCES NEW CAMPAIGN TO RAISE AWARENESS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

#TruthAboutTrafficking Social Media Campaign Aimed at Dispelling Misconceptions; Posters Will Be Displayed at New York State Thruway Service Areas

Human Trafficking Referrals Rise in New York State Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo today announced a new social media campaign to raise awareness of human trafficking and help dispel common misconceptions about the crime and its victims. Starting this month, the Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking will begin sharing a series of graphics aimed at correcting these misconceptions along with information about how to report trafficking cases.

"There is a deeply troubling and prevailing misconception that human trafficking only happens in the shadows and in faraway nations, when in reality it's a heinous crime that often happens in plain sight and in our own communities," Governor Cuomo said. "By raising awareness and dispelling the myths surrounding it, more New Yorkers will be able to recognize the signs of human trafficking and report it, to help put an end to this insidious violation of human rights."

The campaign comes at a time when human trafficking referrals have been steadily rising. The state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the Division of Criminal Justice Services - the two agencies that oversee the New York State Trafficking Victim Referral Process - received 177 referrals between January and June, a 70-percent increase over the same period in 2019. These agencies received more referrals during March and June of 2020 than during the same four-month period in any previous year.

The Task Force has designed seven unique graphics to share on social media, with each including a quote about human trafficking that is either false or misleading. Underneath each quote is a fact that corrects the misconception and provides the contact information for victims to get help and for the public or service providers to report trafficking. The graphics will be shared on the social media pages of the Task Force's member agencies along with the hashtag, #TruthAboutTrafficking. Posters will also be displayed at New York State Thruway service areas. The graphics will be available for download here.

Under Governor Cuomo's leadership, New York State has taken great strides to combat human trafficking and protect the rights of victims. The Governor signed into law legislation that designated sex trafficking as a violent felony in New York State and eliminated a loophole that required children to show force, fraud or coercion to demonstrate their victimization. This legislation also allowed legal and social service providers to report cases to the New York State Victim Referral Process, a change that increased referrals by 150 percent from 2015 to 2016.

New York State allocates nearly $2.4 million annually to the Response to Human Trafficking Program, which provides case management and referral services to confirmed human trafficking victims throughout the state. Administered by OTDA, the program focuses on those victims who would otherwise have no access to needed services, including those who are beginning to work in coordination with an investigation or prosecution and have been confirmed as a victim.

OTDA and DCJS together work to confirm human trafficking cases so that victims can receive a host of services regardless of immigration status or whether they are cooperating with law enforcement. These services include shelter or rental assistance, health assessment, medical care, mental health counseling, legal services, food assistance and other identified service needs.

The commissioners of OTDA and DCJS also oversee the Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking, which includes 10-member agencies that coordinate all the state's interagency activities regarding human trafficking. The agencies recently launched an electronic referral system, which will allow even wider access to victim assistance resources throughout the state.

Since the Task Force was established in 2007 through 2019, there have been 1,541 confirmed victims. This includes 1,155 victims of sex trafficking, 300 victims of labor trafficking and 86 victims of both. There were 288 victims of human trafficking confirmed in 2019 alone.

Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Commissioner and Task Force Co-Chairman Mike Hein said, "Human traffickers observe no boundaries and prey on those who are vulnerable, meaning that this crime can happen in any of our communities throughout New York State. Yet all too often, the public perception of

this crime does not match its reality. This campaign will bring greater awareness to human trafficking, which will ultimately help better identify cases and assist victims of this horrible crime."

Division of Criminal Justice Services Executive Deputy Commissioner and Task Force Co-Chairman Michael C. Green said, "We at DCJS work hard to help law enforcement combat human trafficking by providing training to help investigators recognize and respond to it. Under Governor Cuomo's leadership, New York State closed a loophole that once allowed child traffickers to evade full prosecution, and now we are proud to continue our state's progress by working with OTDA, members of the Task Force and the law enforcement community to raise public awareness so we can help put an end to human trafficking."

Office of Victim Services Director Elizabeth Cronin said, "We thank Governor Cuomo, OTDA and our Task Force partners for leading the fight against human trafficking, a global problem that encompasses forced labor, involuntary domestic servitude and sex trafficking. We are proud to join in this effort to help raise awareness so victims and survivors can receive the help they need to break free and heal."

New York State Thruway Executive Director Matthew J. Driscoll said, "Awareness of human trafficking starts with recognizing the nature and the nuances of this crime. These posters will help visitors to our service areas better recognize the signs of trafficking they may encounter both in their travels and at home. We are proud to be a part of the effort to end human trafficking and to display these posters at our 27 service areas across New York State and applaud Governor Cuomo's commitment to addressing this serious affront to human dignity."

Anyone who suspects they may be a victim or a witness to human trafficking is encouraged to call the Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888 or text "HELP" to 233733 (BeFree). Additionally, help for victims is also available through the Office of Victim Services, which is a member agency on the Task Force and funds more than 200 victim assistance programs that provide direct services, including counseling, advocacy and legal services throughout the state.