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Campaign aims to teach hotel staff how to identify sex-trafficking victims



Oakdale Police Chief Bill Sullivan speaks during a news conference at the Washington County Government Center in Stillwater Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017 about the “Step Up” campaign, which aims to teach hotel and motel professionals how to identify and respond to victims of sex trafficking. Washington County Attorney Pete Orput, left, and Woodbury Police Chief Lee Vague, right, stand behind Sullivan. (Ryan Faircloth /

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By **RYAN FAIRCLOTH** | rfaircloth@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

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Washington County and area law enforcement are looking for a new ally in their efforts to help identify and respond to victims of sex-trafficking.

The “Speak Up” campaign, announced by Washington County and other local law enforcement officials Thursday morning, aims to train workers at local hotels and motels in sex-trafficking identification and response.

“They can’t (speak up) and they won’t unless we take the initiative to reach out, train our people what to look for and then aggressively go after the perpetrators of this,” said Washington County Sheriff Dan Starry.

The Twin Cities is among 13 U.S. metro areas with the highest incident rates of juvenile sex-trafficking, according to the FBI.

The Speak Up campaign is a partnership between the Washington County attorney’s and sheriff’s offices, Washington County Public Health and Environment, and law enforcement from Woodbury, Cottage Grove, Oakdale and elsewhere.

“The one thing all of us are smart enough to realize is we do not have the resources to do this alone,” said Oakdale Police Chief Bill Sullivan. “If we combine the resources with these various agencies, we feel that we’re going to be a lot more effective.”

Authorities will train hospitality staff to recognize physical and behavioral indicators displayed by traffickers and victims through a mix of video and speaker presentations, said Doug Dyer, environmental program supervisor for Washington County Public Health.



Sheriff Dan Starry

Potential indicators include paying only in cash, checking in with no luggage and uncomfortable body language between the trafficker and victim, Sullivan said.

“Very few, if any, victims actually come forward. We have to find them, we have to be their voice and we have to provide their recovery,” said Imran Ali, Washington County assistant attorney and director of the anti-sex-trafficking unit.

Speak Up is yet another initiative Washington County is using to tackle the problem of sex-trafficking.

The county first announced the formation of a coalition of prosecutors, law enforcement and social workers to combat sex-trafficking in November 2015.

Ali said 28 such arrests have been made in Washington County since 2016, compared with none in 2015.

Additionally, more than 50 victims were recovered in the last year, he said.

Earlier this year, Washington County authorities made arrests in a sex-trafficking operation they say spanned several states.

“Our partnerships have already worked and have resulted in successful prosecutions that have resulted in successful charges,” Ali said.

The Speak Up training will be conducted throughout the rest of the year and on an ongoing basis.

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