R+E Season 8 Episode 9

Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Human Trafficking in Mississippi

[00:00:00] Hey everyone, this is Ethan Kelly with Providence Capital Management, where we help you provide for your future. When it comes to your company's 401plan, there are three key areas every business owner or manager should understand: investments, service, and administration. First, investments. The funds you offer, whether index funds, target date funds, or managed portfolios, shape how successful your plan can be.

A well-managed 401gives employees choice and confidence, helping them invest according to their financial goals and risk tolerance. Second, service. Ask yourself, who's your company's 401advisor? When was the last time you talked to them? If you don't know, maybe we should talk. And finally, administration.

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Hey, I'm Matt Easterling from the Robertson and Easterling podcast. On today's episode, I'm joined by an associate attorney from my firm, Madeline Blanton, as well as Amanda Dollar who is the executive director of the Mississippi Coalition Against Human Trafficking. We're gonna cover, what human trafficking is, which is, I've learned is so much different than what I would've thought it was.

Warning signs to look out for, the types of individuals that are at risk, and most importantly, how we can get these victims help. We appreciate you, as always, tuning in to the podcast and I believe you're gonna get a lot out of today's episode.[00:02:00]

Welcome to your Wellness Reset with Kelly Englemann. Feeling tired and run down? You're not alone, and your diet might be the culprit. Some of us are familiar with the standard American diet, or SAD, which is often packed with highly processed foods. Processed foods can lead to energy crashes, fatigue, leaving you feeling sluggish, unmotivated.

These are typically high in refined sugars and unhealthy fats, which can spike your blood sugar levels and only leave you crashing shortly after. It's a cycle that can drain your vitality. But here's the good news. You can turn this around by focusing on whole, nutrient-dense foods. Think about incorporating more leafy greens, vibrant vegetables, nuts, and quality proteins like fish, chicken, and even plant-based proteins into your meals.

These foods are packed with vitamins and minerals, and your body needs these to produce energy efficiently. They're basically food for your mitochondria, [00:03:00] the powerhouse of your cells. Here are a few tips to help you improve your energy levels. Start the day with a balanced breakfast that includes protein and healthy fats.

Try a smoothie with spinach and nut butter, and top that with berries. A smart snack. Instead of reaching for processed snacks, choose a whole food like carrot sticks with hummus, a handful of nuts, or plant-based yogurt with fruit. Plan your meals around whole food. Aim for a colorful plate with various fruits and vegetables.

The more variety, the more nutrients you'll get. And then stay hydrated. Sometimes fatigue can be a sign of dehydration. Aim for at least eight eight-ounce glasses of water a day to keep your energy levels up. By incorporating more whole foods into your diet, you can sustain your energy levels throughout the day and truly feel more like yourself again.

So make the shift today. Your body will thank you, and you'll be amazed at how much better you feel. For more information, visit us online at enhancewellness.com or give us a call, [00:04:00] 601-364-1132.

Welcome back to the Robertson and Easterling Podcast. I'm Matt Easterling, and today I am really excited to be joined by one of my coworkers, Madeline Blanton, an associate attorney at Robertson and Easterling, and Amanda Dollar. Amanda is the executive director of the Mississippi Coalition Against Human Trafficking.

She's widely regarded as an expert in the human trafficking field here in Mississippi. She provides statewide leadership focused on building coordinated collaborative resources for trafficking victims, bringing together professionals, community leaders, and faith-based organizations to strengthen prevention, improve survivor support, and enhance cross-sector partnerships across Mississippi.

Amanda joined the coalition in January of 2024, serving first as director of workforce development and director of survivor support before being appointed executive director in August of '25. Her leadership is deeply rooted in trauma-informed survivor center practices and [00:05:00] in equipping communities with tools and knowledge they need to address exploitation effectively.

Before her work with Coalition, Amanda was one of the first people in Mississippi to become a certified rapid response advocate, along with her work as a case manager with the Center for Violence Prevention. Her background also includes experience in juvenile detention centers, substance use treatment, and disaster relief case management, giving her a broad understanding of crisis response and long-term recovery.

Amanda is a native of Tippah County, deeply involved in her church and local community, and serves on the board of a crisis pregnancy center. She lives there with her husband, Ted, and their three children. Amanda, thank you so much for being here with us today. Thank you so much for having me. I greatly appreciate the opportunity.

Amanda I know that in, in getting ready to do today's episode, I learned that I had absolutely no idea what trafficking actually was, or my idea of what it was incorrect. So I can't imagine [00:06:00] a better way to, to start than just you letting our listeners know what exactly is human trafficking.

Yeah. In our state, it looks so much differently. And in frankly, even our country, it looks so much differently than what we think about when we've when we think about human trafficking oftentimes because of what we've seen in the movies and what we've seen through social media, these sensationalized stories with white vans in the parking lot or zip ties on somebody's car, these different things like that.

And so it is, it's much more common and than people realize. But what we see oftentimes is starts out as familial trafficking in our state. And so that is when someone is trafficked by a family member. So that's one of the most common forms of trafficking that we see in our state. It is when minors so anyone under the age of 18 is being trafficked by their mother, their father their uncles, [00:07:00] aunts, grandparents.

It's someone that has this guardianship relationship, this guardian-type relationship. And so oftentimes these kids, these youth, they're brought up in this, and they don't even recognize this as something out of the ordinary for

them. And so they're not typically gonna, go to a teacher at school or just call a hotline or whatever and say, "Hey, I'm a victim of human trafficking," because they don't know what that is, and this is something that's been normalized throughout their life.

And so what we see is, these parents, they might have a drug addiction, a drug problem, and so they will essentially trade out their children to support their drug habit. And but when I say trade out their children might not ever leave home. They might go to school.

They might you know- Be in the community, playing sports even. But still when they go home, they're experiencing ex- experiencing this throughout their throughout their childhood. And so then they would go, become older [00:08:00] and they wind up in these other relationships that become, oftentimes they're domestic violence in nature, but then they can turn and and become trafficked in those ways.

So it's very relational. Oftentimes we see youth that are or even doesn't even have to be youth, it can be someone in their, early 20s that meet someone on social media. And they say, "Hey, I'm gonna take care of you. I'll give you a place to stay. I'll help pay your bills. I'm gonna, pay for your school," whatever it might be.

And so they start this relationship with this person and they think, "Oh man this is the guy of my dreams. This is the person of my dreams. They're gonna help me out. They really love me. They really care about me." And then that person kind of flips that switch and then they expect something in return.

But it's usually well into the relationship. There's a lot of grooming that goes into this. It's not something that happens overnight. That's why when we see these sensationalized stories about, a parking lot or a [00:09:00] white van that comes along, that's not typically human trafficking. Obviously people need to be aware of their surroundings when there are people who are looking to, rob, assault, any number of things.

But human traffickers work much differently, and they form these relationships, whether it be a familial side that has just always been there through this parental-type relationship, or someone they have met, as a romantic relationship, or even someone that maybe they look up to.

We've seen young people actually trafficked by women who said, "Hey, listen, I know you're going through a hard time. You come stay with me. I'll help you

out. I'll take care of things. I'll pay the bills." And this person who's almost like a mother figure to this young person who's maybe vulnerable in whatever, whatever reason maybe on the street and just needs a little extra help, they see this as someone who really wants to help them.

And so they will go and stay with this, this woman. [00:10:00] And before long, this, the lady says, "Hey, look, you've ... i've come through. I've done all these things. There's bills gotta be paid here, and you've been eating my food. You've been staying under my roof, so this is what you're gonna have to do to make this money back."

So it is, it's through relationships. It's through this manipulation that takes place, this psychological manipulation, and that is what human traffickers use to be able to coerce their victims to go willingly and be a part willingly. I'm sure there's a specific reason why Mississippi, we're seeing familial trafficking a little more prevalent than other states, but can you help us understand why that specific type of trafficking is more prevalent here as opposed to other places?

It has a lot to do with poverty in our state and the rural nature of our state. There's certain areas that I have actually been told by, people in youth services and others that, that it's almost seen in certain areas that families see this as almost their lot in life. They [00:11:00] live in this impoverished environment.

There's not a lot of work, there's not a lot of opportunities, and even education opportunities are snuffed out at an early age. And for different familial type reasons, but oftentimes kids are even pulled out of school early on because of an unstable home environment, and it usually does revolve around poverty.

And then when drugs are a part of that if you've got someone that's, they're living, in a, just a small house and they're unable to pay their bills, they're unable to pay their rent, they're unable to pay their utilities, but they have this drug habit, and but they don't have a job how are they supplying these things?

How is the rent getting paid? How are the utilities getting paid? How is, how are these drugs being supplied? If there's a child living in the home that's a top commodity right there, unfortunately. So they can sell this child time and time again to people coming in and out of their house.

In turn, they get their bills paid. In turn, they get their drug habit supplied. So we unfortunately see this. And in the rural setting of the areas it [00:12:00] just oftentimes goes unreported, unnoticed, unseen. From the surface, it might just

look like, a mother struggling to get by, a grandmother taking care of multiple children, they're just struggling to get by.

But, one of the things to look at, if there's a lot of traffic in and out of this home, whether it be an apartment or if you've got a, kids living at a motel, and they're there with a caregiver out of this motel, but nobody's working. So how is the ho- how is the motel, hotel getting paid for?

How's that room getting paid for? How are they getting their food? How are they getting these things? And so when we look beneath the surface, it's oftentimes that the, the mother or another caregiver in the family is trafficking this, these minors out and oftentimes even themselves out, trading themselves to be able to supply that drug habit, to be able to have a place to stay.

Okay. So just for clarity The, the trafficker would be the individual who is, selling or receiving compensation of [00:13:00] either this sexual acts for a, a child or anybody else that is under their control to a person who is soliciting those services? Okay. Yeah, and so going back to the definition of that and I did kind of skim over that earlier, but so human trafficking is basically trading commercial sex- anything of value that's traded.

So commercial sex act would be anything of value that's traded for a sex act. So that could be an image, it could be a video, it could be a dance. Doesn't necessarily have to be, sexual intercourse. So anything sexual in nature that is in, in exchange for something of value. So that something of value, that could be a place to stay.

It could be drugs, it could be money. So it might not necessarily be what people first think about something of value. I've seen it be a pair of shoes for someone. Seen it to be their rent. So anything of value traded for [00:14:00] a sex act in some kind of way. Again, think about OnlyFans. That's huge right now.

It's been huge for the last couple of years. So if you've got a person on there that's trading, pictures or videos, especially if it's a minor, and there's someone who is essentially paying for that trading for something of value, it could be sending gifts it could be money, whatever it might be, that could be by, by the standard of law considered human trafficking.

So it's basically force or fraud or coercion to compel another person to engage in a commercial sex act, is the legal definition, unless that person is under the age of eighteen. So if you have a person under the age of eighteen engaging in any of these things, it's automatically human trafficking.

Whether it's someone like on, on OnlyFans, for an example, that might be paying a minor for pictures, paying a minor for videos, that could be-- that would be because that person [00:15:00] is a minor, that would be considered human trafficking. Now, if they're over the age of eighteen, there would have to be some kind of element of force or fraud or coercion.

But, a lot of times we see if there's a person who is an adult and they are maybe they're drug addicted or maybe they're just really, hard on their luck, they're living out on the street, they're homeless, someone comes along and says, "Hey, I'm gonna give you a place to stay.

I'll take care of you. I'll give you some money. I'll pay for your drugs," that can be a form of coercion because that person is depending on that. Because again, that is a need that they have, a place to stay. Even their drugs, it can become, can be a physical need that they have, because we have seen people, due to the fear of going through withdrawals and what that does to a person, it could actually, withdrawals can actually take a person's life.

So that's something that is so strong that they will oftentimes trade drugs for sex. And we think about in terms of survival se- sex, [00:16:00] but in in certain circumstances, that is a form of coercion, especially when there's an adult involved. If there's a minor, again, if there's a minor and there is any kind of commercial sex, so anything of value traded for a, a sex act, that's automatically human trafficking.

Earlier, you were saying that it's not always, the white van, in a parking lot or zip ties, and I kinda wanna go back to maybe the general population's idea of what trafficking is because I think we have a... Most people have a Hollywood perception, either from movies or podcasts.

True crime is all the rage right now. And can you tell us a little bit about, you said grooming is a huge part of it. It do- it sounds like it doesn't seem to be random like people might think that it is. Trafficking in general is not random absolutely. So traffickers will intentionally pick out those who are, that they perceive as vulnerable.

And so online that can look [00:17:00] like, friending a, a 14, 15-year-old online or playing video games with them. These adults that play, wind up on these video games or these like Discord and some of these apps that discuss that kind of thing. So there's usually a friending of some kind that takes place.

And then there's, sharing a little bit of information, finding out about that person's life. They've already done enough background to see this, this kid obviously has some, some vulnerabilities. Maybe it could be they didn't-- don't seem to have a lot of friends, or they- they're not involved in a lot of different activities, or maybe there's something going on in their home life.

They're just very perceptive on picking up on vulnerabilities and, frankly, just being a, a minor is a vulnerability. Just being a child and having an adult prey upon you, that's vulnerability enough. But there are some additional things. If there's a child that's living in poverty, but then somebody comes along and they're talking to them, [00:18:00] online in, in some kind of way, and they start...

maybe they send them a gift, maybe they send them that new pair of shoes, or maybe they se- send them, a link to get the newest video game that they couldn't afford, couldn't pay for or, whatever it might be, they send them something. And then that child then is a little bit on the hook because they feel like, "Oh this is a safe person.

I've been talking to them now for six weeks. I know them. They've sent me a gift. They seem like a really nice person." And then they wind up meeting them in person. And then that is where we see oftentimes that switch, again, begi- gets flipped. Just give you an example of this 'cause I feel like that is more helpful than anything.

But several years ago, I worked with a, a girl that was a senior in high school in a very small town in rural Mississippi, and she had met a guy on Instagram And he was from about an hour away, more of a, a metropolitan area, and he had, they had a mutual friend. And so he started, he would like her stuff on [00:19:00] occasion, just little things that she would say, or she would, post her selfies.

He would like those, pay attention to those. And then, but he knew that she grew up in the country. He knew by things that she said that she saw herself as a princess, and she wanted that princess life, and she was desperate for that. And so over time, he started telling her, how beautiful she is and all these things feeding into that.

And so she thought that they were entering a relationship He comes to see her. He's driving a really nice car when he shows up. He's a gentleman to her. He's not out of the way in any kind of way. And he leaves, goes back, and then, over

time they continue to talk, and he eventually says to her, "I really want you to come and move in with me.

I'm gonna take care of you. I'll pay for you to go to college. If you don't wanna go to college, that's okay. I've got this wonderful job, and you can just stay home, and we can have this wonderful life together." And so she was going to go with him, but we got involved and [00:20:00] was able to get some law enforcement involved and investigate.

And he was actually part of a gang and he was what we-- what would be considered a kind of a low man on the totem pole. So he was the one, he was younger, and he was sent out to find these girls. And so she was actually sold to a buyer in Chicago before she ever knew what was about to happen. So they had essentially another gang or part of their gang in Chicago where they were going to...

Had she gone with him that day he was gonna-- they were gonna send her to Chicago, and that's where she would be. But we started kinda poking holes in that story. He's only 19 years old, but he says he makes all this money, so how is that possible? How is he gonna do this? And so fortunately enough, she was able to listen and hear all the, the things that we were saying that did not make sense in this scenario, even though her teenage heart wanted to believe that it was true, that this was her knight in shining armor.

But thankfully, she did not go. But [00:21:00] there's been often times that we've seen this, these kids go. There was a young man that I worked with that he met a guy on Discord. He thought that this was a friend of his, sent him gifts then showed up one night at his house saying he needed some help with some things.

And so the young man went willingly with him, took him to another state. And so that is how human traffickers manipulate. And then it's not always through social media. It could be another kind of friendship or relationship through an acquaintance, someone that they meet. There was a girl, and I don't know if we'll get to that or not, 'cause I know I told you that story in the past.

But there was a young girl that I worked with, just met a guy at her part-time job that came in and made promises. And she wound up traveling to another state to be with him, and that turned very badly for her. So that is how traffickers work. They will slowly manipulate. They will slowly look for just any kind of vulnerability, and then they will make sure that they isolate their [00:22:00] victims.

So Over time, they'll say, "Hey, I'm the only one that really understands you. I'm the only one that really cares about how you feel. I don't know why your parents won't allow you to do this or that or go here or there. But if you were with me, I would make sure you got to do all of these things.

I would make sure that you got, taken care of." So that's usually how that manipulation starts. Does does there have to be an element of compensation in order for it to be considered trafficking? Or unfortunately in our office we've encountered, circumstances where, you know, people that are in a relationship that are maybe even married, and you have, say, one side, a, a husband who says I really wanna see, I wanna watch you have sex with another man."

And their wife doesn't wanna do that, but- They're under some sort of, course of control or there's a dynamic in that relationship where they they basically give in, but it's not something that [00:23:00] they want to do, but he's not being, he's not being paid for it or any type of compensation, I guess some sort of, a kink or whatever they get out of that.

Would that be considered trafficking? There is an element of something of value traded, and whether that is it could be something else of value other than money, even other than drugs that he is receiving, that person is receiving in return. You get into when you have these domestic type relationships as far as law goes.

It certainly gets into I don't wanna say a gray area 'cause I hate to use that terminology, but if you're looking at the law, there is a commercial side of it, so it's something of value to be traded for a sex act. Now, obviously, there's there's definitely a violent side of things.

There's definitely a coercion side of things that's there, but you do have to have that commercial element for that. But I feel like if you looked deeply enough, you probably could find that commercial element [00:24:00] oftentimes. Whether that be s- whatever that exchange might be. I think that there could be something like that found.

But as far as the victim services side, which is what I come from and where I have worked all these years there does not have to be a law enforcement involvement or a case or, someone found guilty of something for that person to be able to receive services. And service providers across the state would be more than willing to provide services for that spouse who is victimized in that situation, just like they were a confirmed victim of human trafficking.

Because really, the only thing that is that determining factor is something of a value that's traded. And so everything else is there, the psychological manipulation, the coercion, probably the, the force that's involved in that oftentimes probably something fraudulent even. So I feel like all those boxes would be checked except for that commercial element.

But even if there was [00:25:00] never a case to be taken to trial, even if the person never reported to law enforcement they could absolutely reach out and be able to receive services, and that includes shelter services, that includes transitional living services. So we could, in other south state, be able to help get that person, out of that situation.

Well- I think that this would be a good place for us to hear a brief word from our sponsors. When we return, I'd love to hear more about the coalition and how the different services that, that you guys offer.

Parenting through divorce can feel like being sent into the field without a game plan. Emotions run high, the rules feel unfamiliar, and even small decisions can create lasting consequences for your children. That's why Robertson and Easterling created The Parenting Playbook: Your Game Plan for Raising Healthy Children Through Divorce.

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We're back. Matt and I are here with Amanda Dollar. Right before the break, I think we were talking about some of the services that the coalition provides. And Amanda, I was hoping you could tell us a little bit more about the coalition itself and what y'all do Thank you. So we work with agencies and organizations throughout the state.

So as the coalition, we do a lot to [00:27:00] bring all these different groups that are working to combat human trafficking in our state, whether they're on the law

enforcement side, whether they're on the medical side, service providers that are providing direct services to victims. And so we provide training across state.

We provide technical assistance. That means we get a phone call that says, "Hey, I'm law enforcement. I have this situation. What do I need to do?" We help to provide that information, or if it could be a service provider that has a shelter program and says, "Hey, we've got this person they're a victim of human trafficking.

They're in need of XYZ." And so we help to connect them to those things and help kind of brainstorm and really think outside the box in some situations because each one is so different. But we've been around really working in the state since 2017, really got off the ground 2018. And it's really, the last few years, it has exploded in what we've been able to do to bring people together in the state, but also through our independent living assistance program.

So what that is [00:28:00] we work with service providers who are working directly with victims. And so they've got someone that has been out of a, a trafficking situation, and they are now, months, maybe years even out. And so now they're looking to make that transition into their own independence. And so they might need help with deposits for rent, for utilities whatever that might be.

And so we kinda could come alongside and be able to pay for those things. We have a grant through the attorney general's office that we're able to do that through, and then we also have individual donations that we look to, to be able to provide for those needs. We help with education needs. So if someone is in that independent living and they wanna, they've, they're getting their GED, or maybe they have their high school diploma, but they are looking to, do community college, university, whatever it might be, we can come through and be able to help supply, various educational that needs they have, including even their supplies, like if they need an iPad or if [00:29:00] they need scrubs, whatever it might be.

So that is huge because some of the barriers that survivors experience is, maybe they've been out, out of the situation, out of the life, they've gone through a program, they've got counseling, they've got help, they've got all these things. They are ready to stay, take that next step.

But if there's a lack of education if there's a, a lack of just money to be able to move into that independent living, we're able to help fill those gaps. And what we've seen historically is that is oftentimes where a survivor of human

trafficking will wind up in a, being in another very vulnerable situation, and they have a setback.

'Cause if they've gone through this, this environment, being in a shelter program where, they've got a place to stay, and they've got the food provided, they've g- got utilities paid, and all these things, but when it comes to take that step out, that's where it could get, difficult.

Because, we know just in everyday life, things happen. And it's hard [00:30:00] oftentimes to get started, to pay rent, to be able to do... Or say they've been living independently for a few months, even a couple of years, and maybe there's, they're laid off from their job. They can reach out to us through their service provider, and we're able to go ahead and pay a couple months' rent.

If they need car repair, maybe their car is broken down and now they can't get to their job that's oftentimes a huge setback. And so we're able to just step in that gap and pay that car. If there's a medical need, a medical setback, we're able to help that. So that kind of helps continue that independent living, because what we were saving, we're seeing oftentimes previously with survivors, when they would get into this independent living phase, if they did encounter a setback maybe they couldn't pay their rent.

There would be somebody in their history or whatever that might come along and say, "Hey, listen, I know you can't pay your rent this month. Let me go and give you the money for that." And then the next thing you know, that turns into something else, and they wind [00:31:00] up in this repetitive state being victimized all over again.

Because, unfortunately when people reach out and say, "Hey, yeah, let me... I'll give you a place to stay," or, "I'll pay for your rent," or, "I'll take care of this for you," there's gonna be strings attached to that. That's gonna come with conditions. Or if the person is in recovery, if the survivor's in recovery from a substance use disorder, which is super common with survivors of human trafficking, because oftentimes drugs are the things that have caused them to be able to be compliant during their victimization, and then they become reliant on it because they're-- that's the thing that allows them to be able to be numb to what they're having to do.

And so they wind up forming an addiction. And they go through a program, they're dealing with their addiction, they get, all these things and they're moving along. If they have a setback, that can often lead to also a setback in their

addiction, and they fall back, right back into that, and they wind up vulnerable all over again, [00:32:00] maybe even on the street all over again.

So this independent living assistance program that we have, our scholarship program, has been really huge in really supporting survivors in their true independence and kinda helping them along while they get that, really established. And so we have been just so thankful for that, and we really appreciate the grant funding that we have, but so much all of the donations, things that we have that go specifically to that and our scholarship program.

We're very thankful for the work that you're doing. Just so I-I have, real clarity, the, the coalition works alongside service providers. Can you give me a few examples of what those service providers might look like? Yeah on the coast there's Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence, and they assist victims of domestic violence as well as human trafficking.

And we have others throughout the state. There's Center for Violence Prevention in central Mississippi, the Transformation Garden up north, and then there's some others like [00:33:00] DAFS across the state and other service providers that are working with victims of human trafficking in various capacities, whether that's through, through a domestic violence program, because d- we know domestic violence and human trafficking oftentimes go hand-in-hand because of that relational side of things.

And so they're already working with these victims. They have been recovered out of a situation or have, sought assistance out of a situation. And so they have received those immediate needs that they had for food, shelter, medical, all of those things. And so now they're walking through their program, and so they're getting counseling, they're getting medical needs, they're getting help with some education things.

They're really starting to plan for the future as they go through these programs. And most of these programs are longer term programs, so they can stay in there months up to a couple of years. And so from that point then they'll reach out to us as they are making that transition and say, "Hey, look, we've got this person, and this is [00:34:00] what they're planning to do.

This is their goals." And we help to work alongside with those case managers and those survivors to be able to help them meet those goals. Again, whether that's educational, housing, whatever it might be. Are there any circumstances where the assistance that these victims are being provided, does it, can it flow the opposite direction as well?

Do people reach out to the coalition when they suspect a trafficking situation or they've have been trafficked and you guys help set them up with support services or law enforcement? Yes, that happens Daily almost, definitely weekly. Was talking with someone yesterday that, that very situation.

So they reach out to us directly. We're gonna do a quick little assessment as to what they need, what they want, if it's an emergency situation, because that's gonna look completely different than someone who maybe has been trying to make it on their own but experiencing some setbacks.

But if they need, emergent medical, we make sure that we, get them those referrals. They-- If they [00:35:00] want to seek out law enforcement. Of course, when you have a minor involved, it has to be automatically a CPS referral. Typically, we don't get, calls for minors. It is typically for an adult.

But if it's an adult, they want law enforcement involved, we help navigate that process. But we always connect them to a service provider that's in their immediate area to help because that service provider in their immediate area in the state is able to help them, for-- advocate for them, whatever they need on the immediate, but then also help them, plan for their future and their goals and things that they want to do.

Are you seeing people more often just wanting to get out of the situation that they're in, or do most of them want to pursue something with law enforcement? Most wanna get out of the situation they're in. Most of the time they do not want law enforcement involved because, there's a lot of fear that goes along with that.

They just, they just want to be away from it. But they don't want law enforcement. Our numbers in the state I was trying to pull up some most recent stats [00:36:00] earlier, and I don't know that we have those from twenty-twenty five yet. But twenty-twenty three and twenty-twenty four numbers in our state, I don't have those directly in front of me to actually spit out numbers, but I can tell you those numbers are skewed because there's-- we get a lot more reports of human trafficking than we do...

And I say we, I'm talking about agencies, organizations through the National Human Traf-Trafficking Hotline or whatever the state because you might get reports, but those never really go through law enforcement. You don't see a lot of convictions. You don't see a lot of those things. So we're seeing more of those.

But first of all, human trafficking victims do not usually self-identify as victims. They might say, "Hey, look, I'm in a really bad situation. This is dangerous. I'm scared. I'm afraid. I'm tired of living this life. I'm tired of doing this," but they blame themselves. And so they bra-blame themselves oftentimes for their predicament.

So they don't say, "Hey, I'm a victim of this." But there is a recognition that they need some kinda help, support, and they'll reach out. But we are-- I [00:37:00] feel like as a state, we're doing a much better job educating across the state through our communities and other organizations throughout the state.

So I do think there are more people stepping forward to say, "Hey, look, I don't know that I'm a victim of human trafficking, but I know I'm a victim. I s- I know something has happened," and they will reach out for assistance. But yes most of the time there is that fear of having law enforcement involved.

And so we usually, when we're involved, we usually try to kinda talk through some, some different scenarios with them and let them really kinda look at the whole picture, but we do go ahead and route them directly to victim services. So if they decide to report to law enforcement, that's up to them.

But if not, they do have victim services they can go directly to and go ahead and start that, that path and plan. It might be, weeks, months, years down the road that they decide to report that, but that's up to them when they're an adult. Again, if it's a minor, it's automatically has to be a report, made.

But I don't know if [00:38:00] This is the right time to share this story, but, I worked with a young woman a few years ago, and she called for help, got out of a situation. She didn't know she was being trafficked. She just knew that this was a really bad, scary situation that she had been involved in for several years, and she wanted out.

And so went through the process, got her help, but they eventually hunted her down and murdered her because they considered her a snitch. Oh, no. And so that threat, oftentimes victims feel is very real. And so there is that fear associated with going, with going to law enforcement. But there is so much in our state that is offered service-wise, but also offered, safety-wi-wise for victims.

So if there are victims who do wanna reach out to law enforcement, of course, we encourage that because that is the thing that's gonna stop that predator from

continuing to prey upon their victims. Looking for-- because for every girl that gets [00:39:00] assistance this, this trafficker, they're just replacing them.

They're just looking to replace because that's money to them. And so if we can get that information to law enforcement, get that person prosecuted and convicted, then that, that's one less person that's doing it on the street. So we certainly encourage that, and we really do try to connect them to the service providers that can provide.

All of the shelter services that we work with across the state are totally anonymous. Confidentiality is huge. The locations are private. So safety is really high priority for these service providers. So we try to encourage, the victims for that. And this young girl that was that had her life taken she left.

She left the service provider and went out and was found. It's certainly a scary thing, though, for victims when they get ready to leave because the, the stakes are very high for them. That's awful. As, as we're, winding down the, today's episode, is there, [00:40:00] are there any warning signs or things that third-party observers can look out for if you maybe suspect that you're, you're seeing or you're encountering someone who might be a, a victim of a, a trafficking situation?

Absolutely. And, I think it's important to kinda go back and revisit what I'd said earlier about trafficking being so relational. Traffickers find their victims, manipulate their victims through relationship. And I think if we as community members, whether it's on a professional level or just, community members, like in the church or our neighborhood, schools, whatever it might be take time to have relationship with others, take time to have conversations with others and invest in others' lives, I think then that's when we will see, and also build that trust with these that are that are more vulnerable to maybe being trafficked.

And signs that you see. So in adults, it could be multiple cell phones. It could be, they might be living in a motel, or they might be [00:41:00] traveling from place to place. There might be a lot of traffic in and out of their, where they are staying. These are red flags.

If they're in a medical setting, there might be a person that's with them that is controlling the entire conversation, and they're, they may be afraid to talk, may be afraid to speak. Maybe they have a drug addiction, and then, but there's no obvious signs of how are they getting their drugs paid for?

Like, how are their bills getting paid for? Those type things. But For minors, you might have chronic runaways multiple delinquency charges. I used to spend a whole lot of time at the juvenile detention center because most of... a lot of my kids that I worked with, they had charges. They were running away.

They had behavioral issues. And so on the outside, they were seen as just, troubled kids, but they had this other going on in their life, whether it was through their family member or romantic lash- relationship or some other relationship that they formed. So oftentimes substance use disorder, [00:42:00] again, how are, how is that getting paid for?

Maybe a relationship with an older person, suddenly secretive about, where they're going, where they've been, who they've been talking to. They become more isolated from family, from friends, things that maybe they did before that they enjoyed they're no longer doing. Maybe they're suddenly having poor grades, falling asleep in class.

A lot of these things are red flags. Amanda, what I think I was hearing you say is that we all need to try to be better listeners and to really try to get to know the people around us, especially more vulnerable people, and be engaged in their lives and what they're doing and take a genuine interest.

But if we do not have the opportunity to do that to get to know somebody, what can a person physically observe that might be a sign of trafficking? So I think one of the things that's really important are tattoos, especially in minors. And I know because we don't oftentimes think about minors having tattoos, but that is one of the things [00:43:00] that pretty much most of the victims, minor victims that I've worked with and seen over the years, they have different affiliated tattoos, or it could be a pimp name, something along those lines.

I have seen loyalty a number of times that would be tattooed on someone I was working with, whether it be their neck, their face, whatever it might be. And that also oftentimes is indicative that they have kept their mouth shut, and they have maybe taken charges for the trafficker. And that is certainly a sign.

Signs of neglect if you see that, whether it being a minor or an adult inability to make eye contact, maybe there's some behavioral things that, that really stand out. But on our website, nomoreht.org, there is there's information on that, some pictures of different type, types of gang-affiliated tattoos you know, pimp names.

If you see things, flashing money, there'll be pictures of people flashing money or maybe money symbols that people have on their tattoos. So [00:44:00] these type things are also indicative of, possible human trafficking. So if somebody suspects that they are encountering someone who might be a victim of trafficking, what do they need to do?

So when you suspect someone is a victim of trafficking and you really have... If it's a minor, you need to make a CPS report. That is number one. Because at the end of the day, you can look at the CPS reporting law, but at the end of the day, we're all really mandated reporters. So if there's enough information there where you feel that, "Hey there's something going on here," so you can report that through CPS's hotline or through their website.

And you can actually do that anonymously. And I tell educators this, I tell school administrators this, because there's this whole process of reporting to CPS oftentimes in the school system. And so I feel like a lot of times educators, bus drivers, others that might see this, they might be fearful of making a false report or [00:45:00] maybe getting in trouble through their administration or whatever it might.

So you can report that anon- anonymously, either on the CPS hotline or online. And then you just gotta make sure that there's the, there's a human trafficking box that's part of that, that you check that box, because that does bring an additional response from law enforcement state and local law enforcement certified human trafficking investigators that respond to that, and then certified victim advocates as well.

And then if it's an adult victim, there's that National Human Trafficking hotline number, and that's 888-373-7888. That is the National Human Trafficking hotline, but they are directly connected to local and state law enforcement. So for every tip, every bit of information that goes to that hotline, they immediately contact the state l- and local authorities in that area that they got the tip from.

Amanda, in, in addition to all of these, [00:46:00] warning signs and signals that, just the public at large should be, on the lookout for tell us some other ways that people can help. Are are there ways to donate money towards the coalition or to, to support your cause? Yeah, absolutely.

I always encourage people to, to get involved with your state representatives, your state senators. It's so important. We've got some really good laws in our state, but, there's always ways and areas that we can do better. Funding is always, a, a big need because most of, whether it be our organization or others

throughout the state who serve victims of human trafficking, we rely very heavily on funding, and that is through, oftentimes through grants.

And so the legislature is a, a big part of that for us. And so get involved in that. Be a voice for those who are voiceless. We take volunteers at at our coalition. They... We've got a couple of different levels to volunteer. You can volunteer at events. [00:47:00] We have an ambassador program where we train up to allow to go speak on our behalf at events.

But then also we have a mentor program that that someone can, that a volunteer could walk through. There's a lot of training, there's background checks, there's a lot that goes along with that. But you would be able to be paired with a mentee who is a human trafficking survivor that has completed a human trafficking program, and they're in their independent living.

And it's just a, a time to be able to invest in the relationship with someone and be able to show them, good, supportive, healthy relationships. And of course, like I mentioned, monetary donations. We really depend very heavily on grants and donations. That's our, that's how we and others in our state, run our nonprofits.

We are a charitable organization listed through the Secretary of State's office. We're a 501[c][3]. So you can go to our website, nomoreht.org, to be able to donate, to find out how to [00:48:00] volunteer. But yeah, those are some, some things just off the top of my head that would be hugely helpful. Are there any any fundraisers that you guys do or events that people could be on the lookout for?

So we have our annual golf tournament that takes place in March. And so this next March I don't have it readily in front of me, the date... Oh, wait a minute. Yes, I do. It's actually gonna be March 25th, 2027 at Deerfield Golf Club. That is our third annual MCAT, what stands for Mississippi Coalition Against Human Trafficking Golf Tournament Classic.

It is usually an all-day event. We do lunch. We have amazing prizes, lots of fun. We're always looking for sponsors and for teams. And we have a huge turnout, and it grows each year. So we would love, anyone that would like more information about a team, sponsorship, whatever it might be, to reach out to us for that as well.

I'll certainly have to look into that. I'm always looking [00:49:00] for a good cause I can donate money to, and then ultimately donate those golf balls you

know- ... to the woods and trees and- ... the golf course itself. Yeah. Amanda, we we're so grateful for you being here today and for the work that, that you're doing on a daily basis.

And I I hope that all of our listeners have gotten something out of this today and that it will help somebody out there. Yeah, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I think this was really important for people to hear more about. It was super educational. I was learning while you were talking as well I appreciate it very much.

Thank you guys so much. Thank you. Thank you.

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