

## HSI's Role in Countering Human Trafficking

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*ICE Deputy Director and Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Director Patrick J. Lechleitner delivered the following remarks in a press conference to discuss the critical role Homeland Security Investigations plays in the fight against Human Trafficking.*

Good morning. I'm Patrick J. Lechleitner, Acting Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Each year during National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, ICE joins the Department of Homeland Security to raise awareness about the heinous crime of human trafficking — the practice of exploiting people for profit.

When people are made aware of what Human Trafficking looks like, they can help us recover victims and put traffickers behind bars so they can't hurt anyone else.

Human trafficking is a crisis. It happens every day, in every U.S. state and territory, and all over the world. It transcends race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status.

Last month, I released ICE's Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report to Congress. The report details our successes and challenges over the past year.

With an agency of this size, and one that has such a broad scope of responsibilities, there's a lot to report.

But something I'm incredibly proud of this year is the number of human trafficking victims our people have recovered.

During fiscal year 2023, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) identified and/or assisted 1,806 victims of child exploitation and helped 731 human trafficking victims. Importantly, these are more than numbers — they're *people* who are now able to start moving forward on their road to recovery.

Just last week, a man in West Virginia pleaded guilty to his role in a labor trafficking scheme that victimized a woman for more than a decade — he exploited U.S. immigration laws and falsely claimed that she was his fiancé to get her into the United States.

Then, he made her live at his place of business and forced her to work without pay. He *hid her* from authorities on at least three occasions, but today, **she's safe** — and he's on his way to prison — because of our HSI special agents' hard work.

Because of our broad legal authorities and large international footprint, the Department of Homeland Security has given HSI the tremendous responsibility — and privilege — of leading the DHS Center for Countering Human Trafficking, which is on the front lines in this fight.

The CCHT which is led by HSI and comprised of 16 supporting offices and Components, is staffed with special agents, officers, analysts, and other personnel who take down human traffickers and the criminal organizations that profit from exploiting others.

These dedicated professionals work hard to recover victims and thanks to HSI's victim-centered approach, they can get the assistance they need.

HSI's Victim Assistance Program really leads the way in that department. Our victim assistance specialists and forensic interview specialists work hard to help survivors get their voices back.

They give victims a sense of security and safety, connect them with the resources they need, and help them along the journey from victims to survivors. These specialists also help victims feel safer so they can identify the people who trafficked them *and* other potential victims. Thus, allowing us to help those victims, too.

We also *prevent* trafficking wherever possible.

And that circles back to what National Human Trafficking Prevention Month is all about.

It's up to all of us to raise awareness about human trafficking so we can prevent more people from falling prey to the vicious, greedy traffickers who don't care about what they're doing to others. They only care about themselves and their money.

People are often vulnerable to human trafficking if they:

- Have an unstable living situation;
- Have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence;
- Have run away or are involved in the juvenile justice system, or they're part of the child welfare system;
- Are undocumented immigrants;
- Are living in poverty;
- Are impacted by substance abuse.

Many traffickers are expert manipulators. They convince their prospective victims that they're in love with them, or that there's big money waiting for them. Or trick them with promise of a better life.

And sadly, many people fall for these lies.

It's up to each of us to pay attention and help as many people as we can. You may suspect that someone is being trafficked if:

- They live with their employer or have very poor living conditions, such as multiple people in a dangerously crowded or squalor space;
- They aren't allowed to speak to others without someone else present;
- The things they say seem to be scripted or rehearsed;
- Their employer is holding their identity documents, like passports;

- They show signs of physical abuse, or they're submissive and fearful;
- You notice that they're unpaid or paid very little or they're in the sex trade.

The CCHT supports anti human trafficking efforts all over the country that recover victims.

During fiscal year 2023:

The CCHT supported HSI Arizona in the Phoenix metro area during Super Bowl 57, the Waste Management Phoenix Open golf tournament, and the Barrett-Jackson Auto Auction.

It also supported an HSI Atlanta investigation that identified 13 victims, including one who was brought to the U.S. for sexual exploitation, and helped secure two criminal arrests.

The CCHT supported a HSI Norfolk investigation into a Laundry Service for forced labor, resulting in the conviction of four co-conspirators, and a \$4.1 million restitution order. One victim reported being forced to work 11-hour overnight shifts before attending high school from age 14 through age 16.

Thank you all for joining us here today and for recognizing the importance of putting a stop to human trafficking. Together, that's exactly what we can do.

Thank you.

I'm happy to answer some questions.