

# U.S. Human Service Agencies Respond to Trafficking

By Wade F. Horn, Ph.D.  
Assistant Secretary for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

U.S. agencies work to  
build a safety net for  
victims of trafficking.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch, one of the most deadly Atlantic storms in history, rampaged across Honduras causing death and destruction, and producing enormous economic hardship. Those hardships left Honduran women and girls vulnerable to the false promises of human traffickers who assured the victims that jobs and education awaited them in the United States. The women were lured by their hopes for better opportunities. Instead, they were delivered into the hands of pimps who plunged them into a world of captivity, beatings, and rape. The traffickers used threats, intimidation, and violence to force the women and girls into prostitution.

We do not know exactly how many people are brought to the United States under false pretenses only to be forced to work without pay or be sexually exploited. Current U.S. government estimates range from 18,000 to 20,000. Whatever the number, we are determined to bring this appalling practice to an end within our borders. To this end, President George W. Bush signed a National Security Presidential Directive with the purpose of coordinating U.S. government efforts to combat and eradicate trafficking in persons. This Presidential Directive also states that prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and dehumanizing, contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (Protection Act) conferred several important responsibilities on the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the fight against human trafficking. We have been charged with promoting the public's awareness of trafficking and of the services available to trafficking victims. We certify victims so that they can qualify for benefits under

federal programs. We award grants to nongovernmental organizations to help these victims, and we report annually to Congress on the dimensions of the problem in the United States.

Here is how we are carrying out these mandates under the leadership of Secretary Tommy Thompson so that we can drastically reduce and eventually eradicate the degradation caused by trafficking in human lives.

### Promoting Public Awareness

Currently victims of trafficking are largely hidden, as are those who exploit them for personal gain. HHS is launching an anti-trafficking public awareness campaign which seeks to bring trafficking out of the shadows by encouraging the identification both of victims and traffickers. We intend to create conditions under which victims will feel safe in identifying themselves because they know they will be protected and that there are programs designed to help them. No less important, we hope to reach those who are likely to encounter trafficking victims and enlist their help in freeing the victims and cracking down on the traffickers. We are working closely with the U.S. Department of Justice to accomplish these goals.

The public awareness campaign will use a carefully designed strategy of English and foreign-language media, and innovative means of information dissemination to reach victims and those who might encounter them. Its major messages will be:

- Trafficking in persons is a crime;
- Victims of trafficking are not criminals and need help;
- Such help is available;
- How to recognize a victim of trafficking;
- What to do if you are a victim or you know someone who is.

We expect to launch the campaign in early 2004. In concert with the public awareness campaign, HHS will establish a toll-free trafficking information telephone "hotline," operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Persons hearing the messages will have a place to turn for more detailed information or for referral to local organizations ready to help.

### Certifying Victims of Trafficking

The Protection Act created a certification procedure so that victims can qualify for benefits under existing federally funded programs. Prior to the passage of this law, trafficking victims often lacked legal status in the United States, and thus were not eligible for most types of public assistance or services. However, the Protection Act empowers HHS to certify victims so that they may receive the same benefits and services as those available to refugees, thereby giving trafficking victims access to both state and federal assistance programs.

Since the Protection Act's passage in October 2000, nearly 400 trafficking victims have received this HHS certification. The Protection Act establishes several criteria for receiving certification:

- Individuals must be determined to be victims of a severe form of trafficking<sup>1</sup>;
- Adult victims must either have been granted "continued presence" status by the Attorney General, ensuring their stay to aid in the prosecution of the traffickers, or have made a *bona fide* "T" visa application to the Department of Homeland Security;
- Adult victims must be willing to assist in every reasonable way in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers.

Once these criteria are met, the victims receive a certification letter, and HHS contacts local refugee service providers and other benefit-granting agencies to coordinate benefits and services with local programs. These may include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), medical assistance, food stamps, and Supplemental Security Income. For those who do not qualify for TANF or the federal medical assistance program, an eight-month transitional program for single adults and childless couples, providing cash and medical assistance, may be available. Several of the victims from Honduras received services including mental health counseling, food stamps, medical assistance, English as a second language (ESL) training, and cash assistance through our refugee programs.

Victims may also be eligible to take advantage of programs that encourage employment and self-sufficiency. Program staffers intensively manage

each case, assuring that the victim receives comprehensive assistance to get established in the United States. These programs ensure that victims receive help with employment, food, housing, transportation, health care, and social adjustment. Several of the victims from Honduras took advantage of this program to begin stabilizing their lives. Special programs are available to assist victims under the age of 18.

#### **Awarding Grants to Victim Assistance Groups**

HHS has a long history of working with non-governmental organizations to achieve program objectives. Many such organizations have stepped forward to assist the victims of trafficking in the United States. HHS has supported and encouraged their work by awarding grants of approximately \$8.1 million to 37 organizations over three years. These grants provide services to victims, conduct local community outreach to raise awareness of trafficking issues, and provide training and technical assistance to others engaged in the fight against trafficking. Grantee groups come from 12 states and have assisted victims nationwide. They have helped with case management, education, immigration counseling, family reunification, and guidance on accessing public benefits. In addition, many of our other refugee program grantees have stepped forward to serve trafficking victims.

#### **HHS Special Assistance to Minor Victims**

Tragically, as we saw in the Honduran case, victims of human trafficking are often children. My agency, the Administration for Children and Families, which is part of HHS, takes particular care in assisting these most precious of victims.

Individuals under the age of 18 only need to be determined to be victims of a severe form of trafficking in order to be eligible for federal and certain state benefits and services. Underage victims of trafficking become eligible to enter our Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program, which has a long history of providing comprehensive, intensive, specialized resettlement, and foster care services for unaccompanied refugee minors.

URM services are provided through programs

specifically designed for the reception of refugee youth. We coordinate placements of minors based on individual needs, taking into consideration the cultural, linguistic, and religious background, as well as the special health, educational, and emotional needs of each youngster. Minor victims of trafficking can access comprehensive services that include housing, food, clothing, medical and mental health services, intensive case management, and education. HHS is well equipped to care for the special needs of young trafficking victims as they are found or come forward to receive protection.

#### **The Future HHS Strategy**

Despite our success in implementing the certification process and establishing a network of victim service providers, HHS is seeking new ways to increase the pace of identifying and assisting victims of trafficking and exploring new strategies to better carry out the mandates of the Protection Act.

First, we believe that our upcoming public awareness campaign will encourage many more victims to step forward and seek help and will make those who encounter victims aware of what they are seeing. Despite the passage of the Protection Act and increased attention to the problem of trafficking, the U.S. public generally remains unaware of the plight of trafficking victims. Victims are reluctant to identify themselves because they fear retribution from their captors or deportation. We suspect many victims do not even realize what is being done to them is illegal. The awareness campaign will change that.

Second, HHS is developing a toll-free information and referral line to assist victims and those who help them. Victims and/or their advocates will be able to call for information about local emergency services and receive referrals to groups serving victims of trafficking. Access to interpreters and to a national network of service providers will also be available. Guidance in receiving legal help and meeting the physical and mental health needs of victims will be among the other services available through this information and referral system. .

Finally, HHS is exploring new categories of grants to expand assistance to organizations conducting

outreach activities among populations likely to be aware of victims of trafficking (in areas of known prostitution activities, for example), so as to increase our pace of identification.

The passage of the Protection Act was a tremendous catalyst for federal government action against the grave human tragedy of trafficking in persons. The Protection Act acknowledged trafficking victims as the victims of a criminal enterprise. It gave federal agencies the tools we need to address this tragedy. HHS is committed to increasing the effectiveness and scope of our anti-trafficking efforts as we continue to implement the Protection Act in the

truest spirit of President Bush's stated commitment to uphold "liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere."

<sup>1</sup>Under the Protection Act, severe forms of trafficking in persons means involuntary or underage participation in commercial sex; or the use of coercion, force, or fraud to subject an individual to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, or slavery.