



## **ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE EDUCATES HUNDREDS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ON HOW TO PREVENT HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

*Aligning with state youth health curriculum, student education addresses recent OCHTTF report indicating 40% of sex trafficking and exploitation victims are under 18*

**COSTA MESA, Calif. (January 31, 2024)** – Today the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF), in collaboration with 35 local resource organizations including the Orange County Department of Education, brought together 500 students between the ages 12 to 14 from more than 20 middle schools in Anaheim, Fullerton and Santa Ana Unified School Districts to receive education on how to recognize the signs and dangers of human trafficking. Aligning with the California Health Youth Act (CHYA), this “Know More, Do Better 2.0” conference took place at Vanguard University’s Global Center for Women and Justice (GCJW) to help support the schools in providing all middle- and high-school-age students with prevention education, which includes human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation as one of the curriculum expectations.

Sex trafficking is a very specific and devastating kind of human trafficking, defined as the act of manipulating or forcing anyone, especially young people, into situations of sexual exploitation and commercial sex acts is happening. What often begins with a simple, human need for connection, sex traffickers present themselves as confidants to vulnerable children and young teens who believe they have no one else to confide in. In the latest [OCHTTF Victim Report released in October 2023](#), female minor victims of sex trafficking make up the second largest group of all human trafficking victims identified in Orange County at 32% and male minor victims of sex trafficking at 4%. Due to the concerning fact that 40% of the identified victims of sex trafficking and exploitation are under the age of 18, the OCHTTF, in partnership with government and community-based nonprofits, provided this necessary event in an effort to prevent and protect local youths from becoming victims.

Educational components included motivational speakers highlighting survivor stories, one-on-one conversations, interactive activities and critical discussions. Students learned the importance of self-worth and the power of saying “no” to protect themselves and their peers through presentations detailing how to:

- Define human trafficking, including sex and labor trafficking, as well as its prevalence in Orange County.
- Recognize the signs of healthy relationships and understand the consequences of unhealthy relationships.
- Respond to human trafficking with the tools and resources available to keep youth safe and how to seek help.

“The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force and its community partners are dedicated to disrupting sex and human traffickers’ grooming process, while also creating spaces and reliable networks where children can find the support they desperately need. It is time for a united front focused on prevention, where everyone commits to nurturing the environment where safety is synonymous with knowledge, and

education is the first step in dismantling the business of human trafficking,” said Anaheim Police Chief Rick P. Armendariz

“Our innovative educational approach and engagement strategy provides a means for impressionable middle schoolers to process heavy information through a lens they can understand, enabling them to identify the red flags of unhealthy relationships and trafficking dangers, as well as green flags on who is a trusted person in that youth’s life,” said Michelle Heater, Program Director, Victim Assistance Programs, Waymakers.

“The inaugural event last year was our effort to observe National Human Trafficking Prevention Month and show that human trafficking affects all victims, but youth in particular. As an outcome, community partner Higher Ground observed that awareness among students increased by 50% and the ability to seek help saw similar growth. The positive response prompted us to organize the event for the second year with even more students. We are grateful to everyone who made today possible, especially Bodie and Kendra Tankersley-Davis, the co-moderators who connected so well with our student audience,” said Heater.

“The County of Orange Social Services Agency (SSA) continues to work with its partners on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Steering Committee to develop innovative ways to prevent youth from becoming victims and intervene with those youth who have been affected by sexual exploitation. We are proud to be part of and support the Know More, Do Better 2.0 event as part of those prevention efforts,” said An Tran, Director, Social Services Agency.

“The Global Center for Women and Justice and Vanguard University are honored to play a role in this impactful event. This program was built on an effective peer-to-peer model in which young people, such as the students from Live2Free and Higher Ground, plus a trafficking survivor, help to educate each other,” said Dr. Sandra Morgan, Ph.D., VU professor and director of GCWJ. “Combined with the knowledge and guidance of the community of leaders who made this event possible—school districts, law enforcement and organizations at the front lines of addressing this pervasive crime—we are able to reach many impressionable young people and help them learn to stay safe.”

Teachers and counselors who attended with their students witnessed the impact of this issue on the vulnerable middle school-aged population. Youth rely very heavily on online interactions for their sense of community and connection. Educators are on the front lines with our youth and are encouraged to ensure that this knowledge on how to stay safe in interpersonal interactions, both online and in person, will continue to grow and spread throughout their schools.

The event was organized by the Task Force Lead Agencies, including the Anaheim Police Department, California Highway Patrol, Irvine Police Department, Santa Ana Police Department, OC District Attorney's Office, OC Probation Department, OC Social Services Agency, U.S. Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Attorney's Office and Waymakers. Community partners who also played a role in organizing the event included Anaheim Union High School District, Crittenton Services for Children and Families, Eastside Christian Church, Global Center for Women and Justice at Vanguard University, Higher Ground Youth and Family Services, i-5 Freedom Network, Live2Free, Mary’s Path, Orangewood Foundation, Soroptimists Together Against Trafficking II. Resource organizations including Children’s Hospital of Orange County, Forgotten Children Inc., Girl and Boy Scouts, Global Hope 365, K[her]jut, Laura’s House, Olive Crest, Orange County Department of Education, Public Law Center, Radiant Futures, The Salvation Army, Volunteers of America and UCI Health also took also part Additional contributions towards the event

including Sisters of St. Joseph, Filipino America Lawyers Orange County, Richfield Community Church, International Sanctuary and National League of Young Men Greater Orange Chapter.

**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Jenny Wedge  
(714) 851-2117  
[Jenny@Reveilleinc.com](mailto:Jenny@Reveilleinc.com)

**ABOUT WAYMAKERS**

Waymakers is a lifeline for countless individuals throughout Orange County who are seeking hope and healing after experiencing trauma. The staff and volunteers focus on creating an environment where individuals can make choices that lead to strength and stability. Waymakers has been sheltering children, supporting victims, counseling families, resolving conflicts and educating communities since 1972. Learn more at [Waymakersoc.org](http://Waymakersoc.org).

**ABOUT ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE (OCHTTF)**

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is a multidisciplinary anti human-trafficking effort of over 70 professional fields and agencies including law enforcement, victim service providers, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies, and the community. Waymakers is the lead Victim Service Provider and Anaheim Police Department is the lead law enforcement agency. Learn more at <https://www.ochumantrafficking.com>.

###