



ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE EDUCATES HUNDREDS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ON PREVENTION AND ONLINE SAFETY

New data shows minors now comprise half of local trafficking victims; Annual “Know More, Do Better” conference equips youth with tools to recognize exploitation

COSTA MESA, Calif. (January 26, 2026) – The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF), in collaboration with more than 30 government agencies and community-based nonprofits, brought together approximately 660 middle school students and 65 teacher chaperones from 24 schools across the Anaheim, Fullerton and Santa Ana school districts for the “Know More, Do Better” prevention-focused education conference held at Vanguard University of Southern California. The conference builds on findings from the OCHTTF’s 2025 Human Trafficking Victim Report, which revealed that minors now account for 50% of all trafficking victims assisted locally, with an average age of 14 years old, underscoring the urgent need for early, age-appropriate prevention education.

Taking place at the close of National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, the conference taught the middle school students how to recognize exploitation, navigate online risks, understand healthy relationships and know how to seek help for themselves or their peers. Guided breakout sessions created space for students to share what they are seeing among peers, how exploitation shows up online and in person and how prevention education is shaping their awareness.

“When half of the victims we are assisting are children and young teens, prevention becomes one of the most effective tools we have,” said Lita Mercado, Chief Program Officer at Waymakers. “‘Know More, Do Better’ meets these vulnerable adolescents where they are, before exploitation occurs and gives them the language, confidence and resources to protect themselves and look out for one another.”

Peer-Led Prevention Aligned with State Curriculum

Aligned with the California Healthy Youth Act (CHYA), “Know More, Do Better” supports schools in meeting curriculum expectations related to human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation and healthy relationships. Programming is delivered through a peer-to-peer model, with trained college students from Vanguard University of Southern California’s Global Center for Women and Justice leading discussions alongside Higher Ground’s prevention program and victim assistance experts from Waymakers and other Task Force partners.

This prevention model has demonstrated measurable impact. According to the 2025 Victim Report, students who participated in peer-led education programs showed an 84% increase in

their ability to recognize signs of trafficking and a 115% increase in confidence about how to report concerns or access help.

Expanding Access Beyond the Conference

In addition to the annual conference, evidence-based human trafficking and exploitation curriculum is offered throughout the year in school-based settings, allowing districts and educators to integrate prevention education directly into classrooms. OCHTTF partners also provide training for educators, counselors, parents and caregivers.

Building on this year's momentum, the Task Force announced continued expansion of "Know More, Do Better" into South Orange County for the first time, with close to 100 students representing several new schools at a second location hosted at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo on January 22nd to truly make prevention education and pro-social safety efforts accessible for all Orange County youths. Saddleback College joining the initiative as part of the South County planning team, supporting coordination with participating schools and community partners will send a strong message that across all of Orange County there is a united effort to ensure that protecting youths from human trafficking and exploitation is our community's priority

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About Waymakers

Every day throughout Orange County, people find hope after trauma. They don't simply survive; they find ways to heal – all with the help of Waymakers, formerly called Community Service Programs. Waymakers' eight model programs guide over 120,000 abused children, crime victims, struggling families, acting-out adolescents and people needing mediation services annually. Waymakers has been sheltering children, supporting victims, counseling families, resolving conflicts and educating communities in Orange County since 1972. Learn more at WaymakersOC.org.

About the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is a multidisciplinary anti-human trafficking effort linked by a network of over 70 organizations including law enforcement, victim service providers, prosecution, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies and the community. The OCHTTF is committed to combating all forms of human trafficking, recovering victims, prosecuting offenders, advocating on behalf of victims, raising community awareness and strengthening collaborative partnerships. For more information on the OCHTTF and resources, visit ochumantrafficking.com.