

RESPONSE TO FALSE AND MISLEADING STORIES REGARDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING CIRCULATING ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER PLATFORMS

October 7, 2020

Recently, members of the community have reached out to collaborative partners to raise concerns about the information they are seeing and hearing regarding human trafficking in Orange County. This message from the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is intended to address those concerns and bring attention to the potential harm caused by the false and misleading stories that have been circulating on social media or other information sharing platforms represented as “news.”

We are concerned about posts, articles and memes created and being passed along internet platforms portraying human trafficking in Orange County as a constant, active and immediate threat to local children. As parents and responsible adults, it is in our nature to keep our children safe and free from harm, a responsibility that is not taken lightly. Evil does remain and is out there, and we are certainly not suggesting that bad things do not happen to minors. However, we want to stress that **circulating misinformation or sensationalizing false stories and events can spark unnecessary fear throughout the community as the stories do not match the facts of how human trafficking occurs locally.**

How We Work to Keep Children Safe and Free from Harm

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force coordinates an informed response to human trafficking, by and for, the community in Orange County. We accomplish this by partnering with subject matter experts, including law enforcement and community partners, who provide accurate information based on real time work in the field and their experience engaging with hundreds of potential victims and perpetrators of human trafficking.

Know the Facts About Human Trafficking in Orange County

It is essential to be informed about human trafficking and Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) in the United States and in Orange County—but ***in a responsible and safe way so as not to further endanger the lives of victims, their families or the public.***

WHAT TO AVOID:

- **Sensationalizing**

What is it? Presenting **INACCURATE** information about something that provokes public interest and excitement.

Example: Sharing images of human trafficking victims locked inside cages.

Why it's harmful: Overall, the image does not match the warning signs public and professionals who may encounter victims of human trafficking should look for. The legal and criminal definition of human trafficking is based on the means and circumstances of how one is deprived of their liberty through labor services or commercial sex, *not by how the victim is “supposed to” act to fit the image of the poster* in order to match the narrative within our own imagination.

- **Perpetuating Myths**

What's a Myth? A widely held belief or idea with **no basis of fact or concrete proof.**

Example: An image of a young girl wearing a facemask with the caption, “A child in America is 66,667 times more likely to be sold to human traffickers than die of Covid-19. Your masks assist in them being transported undetected and unidentified by anyone.”

Example: Social media postings warning parents and parent groups not to go to certain stores because traffickers are there scouting children to kidnap and sell.

Why it's harmful: Saying, hearing or sharing something a hundred times does not make it true. In fact, just the opposite, myths can endanger the public or incite violence.

What's the Truth?

Law enforcement, specifically the Task Force, has looked into several recent reports of attempted kidnappings throughout the county. All of them have proven to be false, with the incidents described not ever having been reported directly to law enforcement.

After a decade of combating the human trafficking problem in Orange County and dealing with perpetrators and victims from across the United States, we can confidently state the following;

The great majority of U.S. sex trafficking victims are not kidnapped, as most believe the pimp/trafficker is their “boyfriend” and that this is how boyfriends act in a relationship. Similar to domestic violence, there is a cycle of abuse that manifests with the “girlfriend(s)” selling themselves, only to hand over the money to their “boyfriend” (no matter the age). Other victims are coerced to willingly meet their trafficker. Fraud and coercion also take place through a variety of social media platforms. Out of the hundreds of victims encountered by the Task Force in the past six years, very few have met the legal definition of having been kidnapped. The truth remains that vulnerable minors are more likely to be recruited via the internet than in person.

Don't Be a Part of the Misinformation

We all have a responsibility to vet information with the experts or find the original source before sharing it. Passing along incidents that are anecdotal or manipulated, myth-based theories takes precious time, energy and resources away from the real threat to victims in Orange County and those across California and the United States.

We understand the desire to protect your family, children and community, but please know that there are effective ways to support the anti-trafficking movement in a thoughtful, safe, ethical, and responsible manner.

Here are a couple of places to build your knowledge:

To decipher human trafficking facts versus fiction, visit **Polaris Project** at polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/

For a guide for parents on online sexual exploitation, visit the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children** at missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking

To see how we are combatting human trafficking locally, visit the **Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force** at ochumantrafficking.com