

HUMAN TRAFFICKING: Rep. Davis warns parents, calls for closer attention in St. Louis region

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EDWARDSVILLE - Students and parents were captivated by guest speakers at the **Human Trafficking Student Summit** Monday at **Edwardsville High School**.

The event was coordinated by **U.S. Rep. Rodney Davis**. Davis is heavily involved in national legislation in regard to human trafficking. **FBI Intelligence Analyst, Derek Velazco**, and **The Covering House, Director of Operations, Lindsey Ellis**, also spoke on the issue.

Speakers touched on a variety of human trafficking components, from defining it, talking about sexual slavery, to forced labor and extraction of organs and tissues. The different speakers pointed out that some think this isn't likely on the Metro East side of the Mississippi River, but they made sure to point out it is quite possible here.

Davis addressed the crowd, referring to a similar event he hosted over a year ago, about meeting a particular guest and how she inspired him on the importance of addressing the human trafficking issue.

“A guest at the event went from being an honor roll student to a victim of human trafficking overnight,” he said. “As a father and a member of the **Victims Rights Caucus**, her story deeply impacted me and led to my desire to host this informative event for students in the Metro East St. Louis area of my district. **The United States Department of Justice** identified St. Louis among the top 20 human trafficking jurisdictions in the country. As students, educators, administrators, community leaders and educated citizens, we can work to combat domestic trafficking while protecting and helping victims.”

Davis said he believes human trafficking “really is a problem in our district.”

“Folks think it doesn’t happen in our neighborhoods,” he said. “This event focused on students and reminds them it does happen. Super Bowl Sunday is the single largest event for human trafficking around the globe. This does happen even in the Metro East area.”

The presenters talked about signs that show someone is engaged in this type of activity, gathered from human trafficking victims.

“What I can tell you from one girl is some of the signs are someone buying her clothes or they are older and happen to be establishing a friendship with someone that is way too young for them,” Davis said. “Watch your children’s friends closely.”

Something that will forever rivet Davis happened when he sat next to Aubrey, once a human trafficking victim. She had a number tattoo on her ear.

“It was used to identify her like a piece of livestock,” Davis said. “If I ever see a tattoo like that again, I will always ask if they need help.”

Velazco told of a story of a 15-year-old who started a modeling job and it ultimately became a horror story in the sex trafficking scheme. Velazco confirmed that the St. Louis area is a “hub” for sex trafficking.

Ellis explained her work with The Covering House and said many of the victims of sex trafficking are under 18 years of age.

Something she pointed out is that if a boy starts paying for your cell phone, that is a sign that something may eventually be wrong.

She also explained that sex trafficking is done in a variety of ways from escort services, a hostess bar, club operations and illegal brothel settings.

“The average age of children prostitutes is 13 years old,” she said.

A staggering statistic she pointed out was that of their clients of school age, 70 percent attended school while taking part in sex trafficking operations. She said one of three teens on the street will be lured into prostitution as a way to survive.

Davis has worked on several bills in the **U.S. House of Representatives** to prioritize the prevention of human trafficking by helping pass eight bills to specifically address prevention, identification and ways to help trafficking victims.

“I am pleased the House continues to provide our communities with the tools they need

to prevent human trafficking – which is now the fastest-growing organized crime in the world,” said Davis. “Like with any other crime, putting an end to this terrible practice will require anyone who sees something to say something. The bills passed by the House this week will better prepare those in state and local governments, law enforcement officials and healthcare workers to prevent, identify and help victims of trafficking.”

Additionally, Davis is hosting events in the 13th District, like the one this week, highlighting the issue of human trafficking. He has provided victims and prevention experts with a forum to share their stories and discuss ways to stop human trafficking.

Davis stressed because human trafficking is happening all over the country “it is important to think about it.”

Ellis said that it is extremely important for parents to monitor children’s social media tools from Facebook, Snap Chat, Glide, Whisper and more.

Ellis said St. Louis is an easy area to target with the easy interstate access and middle America location. She said Minneapolis, Atlanta and Chicago are other favored locations for human trafficking.

The most vulnerable for sex trafficking are teenage girls who are enduring money problems, past physical abuse, low self esteem, having improper peer relationships and a need for love and acceptance.

“It’s very easy for young girls to fall victims,” Ellis said.

