



January Is Human Trafficking Awareness Month

by Deborah Lopez

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Department of
**Children &
Family Services**

CHICAGO - January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is partnering with The Power Project to train group home and residential care facility staff across Illinois on how to identify, intervene and prevent human trafficking among their youth in treatment. Nearly 1,000 congregate care staff in 37 facilities across the state completed Commercial Sexual Exploitation 101 training in 2022.

“As a former youth in care, I realize that I could have very easily become a victim of human trafficking when I was younger, and now it’s my passion to look for ways to prevent youth from being trafficked in the first place. It is so much easier to keep a kid from being broken, rather than trying to put them back together,” said The Power

Project Founder and CEO Mieko Taylor. “A key part of prevention is helping create safe spaces for youth to get help when they have been identified as a victim of trafficking. Through this partnership with Illinois DCFS, we can help make that a reality, and I am able to give back to an agency that once gave to me.”

“Human trafficking is not something that only happens to adults in other countries; it occurs every day across Illinois to children whose average age is 14,” said Illinois DCFS Director Marc D. Smith. “Youth in care and those living in congregate care facilities are especially vulnerable, and providing this training to staff who care for our children in these settings is one more step we can take to ensure their safety.”

Often, victims of human trafficking do not seek help because they are fearful, ashamed of their situation, distrust law enforcement or become dependent on the perpetrator. The Illinois Safe Children Act assures that children who are coerced into human trafficking /prostitution are innocent and immune from criminal prosecution and will be placed in the child welfare system with DCFS instead of the criminal justice system.

Illinois DCFS also maintains strong partnerships with the FBI, the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, the Cook County Sheriff’s Office, the Chicago Police Department and the Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center to help locate missing or runaway youth who are at risk of falling victim to human trafficking and ensure appropriate services and housing are in place when a child victim is rescued.

The department partners with three agencies to provide support and services to youth who have been trafficked or are at risk of being trafficked. Chicago’s ReClaim13 provides mentors, a group home for girls aged 10-17 and a transitional living program (TLP) setting for victims of sex trafficking between the ages of 18-25; Hoyleton’s HALO (Healing and Loving Oneself) program provides services and support to youth in southern Illinois who have been victims of sex trafficking or are at risk of becoming victims; and Selah Freedom provides prevention services to youth in care across the state.

KNOW THE SIGNS. A trafficked child might:

- Have an adult control them by speaking for them.
- Seem out of place given the time of day or night.
- Look disheveled or dressed in clothes that they could not afford to buy.
- Show signs of physical abuse such as bruising or red marks.

- Not possess any form of identification.
- Perform inappropriate work for their age and not be compensated.

Anyone who believes a child might be trafficked, or in danger of being trafficked, should immediately call 911 and the DCFS Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873).

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to calls received on the Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. When keeping a child safe means removing them from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible, DCFS is committed to pursuing guardianship or adoption by loving families to provide children with a safe and permanent home. DCFS is also responsible for licensing and monitoring of all Illinois child welfare agencies.