

Human trafficking common in Flushing

by Christine Spagnuolo, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, July 30, 2015 10:30 am

When you hear the phrase “human trafficking” you may think of third-world countries, but the United States is actually the second-highest destination in the world for trafficked women, and most of it happens right here in Queens, experts say.

The YWCA of Flushing held a panel discussion and workshops last Thursday to raise awareness of the problem occurring in Queens, and especially Flushing.

The discussion was led by Kendrick Ross, director of education at the YWCA, who asked the panelists to describe the situation to members of the audience.

Rita Abadi, Mary Caparas and Jimmy Lee spoke of stories they’ve heard in their efforts to stop human trafficking and help the victims.

Abadi is a clinician and operations manager for the Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program. Caparas is the manager for “Project Free” at the NY Asian Women’s Center, which is a program against human trafficking. She also counsels victims of the trade. Lee is the executive director at Restore, which offers undisclosed safe homes for victims who are able to escape and seek refuge.

“Queens is not only the epicenter for trafficking foreigners in New York, it really is on the entire East Coast,” Lee said. “Our partners in other states will often tell us that the victims they take in say they got their start in Flushing or first came to Queens when they immigrated and got involved in the trade.”

The panelists also made it clear that along with the girls and women the media mostly speak of, boys and men are involved in the trade for both labor and sex as well.

Human trafficking in America often happens when people are promised a job here, but once they arrive from overseas it becomes prostitution or slave labor and they are trapped because there is no other way for them to survive.

While a lot of victims in Queens are foreign, the number of human sexual trafficking victims in the United States who are American is actually greater. The U.S. Department of Justice says 83 percent



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The YWCA of Flushing held a discussion on human trafficking last Thursday led by Kendrick Ross, left, Rita Abadi, Jimmy Lee and Mary Caparas. They said it continues to be a problem in Flushing and throughout Queens.

are citizens.

“Sex trafficking is when coercion or force is used to prostitute people,” Abadi said. “A lot of people come to the West knowing they are going to work in the sex trade but thinking they’re just going to pay their debt and leave.”

She added that what happens is when they get here, that they cannot leave. This is considered victimization even if it at first is consensual.

“A lot of women who escape the sex trade,” Abadi said, “will wind up going back to it because that was their means of survival. They had no time to learn the English language, are isolated from the community and have no skills to get another job.”

The “employers” of the victims will often take away their passports and leave them undocumented, the panelists said.

Threats and abuse can also play into keeping these people stuck in the trade and forced to work in salons and other stores here in Queens, on farms in Long Island or as prostitutes in brothels or massage parlors across the city.