

Targeting traffickers

New Suffolk unit sees prostitutes as crime victims

BY ANDREW SMITH
andrew.smith@newsday.com

The Suffolk County Police Department has established a permanent human-trafficking investigation unit, committing to an approach that treats those who work in prostitution as victims of traffickers, county officials announced Monday.

The new unit, the first of its kind on Long Island, will focus instead on those who force women, girls and boys into prostitution, often to support other criminal activity, such as drug dealing or gangs. The team will be staffed by six detectives, including a commanding officer, and two police officers. It had been operating as a temporary unit since May 2017.

"This is not a victimless crime," as prostitution is often described, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said at a news conference. The victims, he and others said, are the prostitutes themselves.

District Attorney Timothy Sini, who established the temporary unit last year when he was police commissioner, said treating those in prostitution as victims is saving lives.

"We're shifting the paradigm," Sini said.

Assistant District Attorney Stacy Skorupa said women working as prostitutes are still arrested but are diverted into the county's Human Trafficking Court in Central Islip, where they are connected with counseling, drug treatment and job training in return for their help in making cases against the drug dealers or gang members who forced them into prostitution.

"The goal of that court is not to be punitive, obviously," Skorupa said. Those who are arrested and complete treatment have their charges dismissed or reduced to a noncriminal violation, she said.

Suffolk's Human Trafficking Court follows a model established six years ago in Nassau, Queens and Manhattan. Suffolk, however, benefits from the po-



Suffolk DA Timothy Sini and other county officials unveil the new human-trafficking unit. "We're shifting the paradigm," he said.

lice department's new unit and a companion unit in the district attorney's office run by Skorupa that Sini established this year.

"We changed our approach dramatically," said Suffolk Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart. Law enforcement no longer will view those in prostitution as criminals but as victims, she said.

That reflects reality, Hart said. Those who sell sex usually do so because they've been coerced into it, she said.

"Females are induced into this activity by getting hooked onto drugs," most often opioids, Hart said.

Since the pilot unit began, she said, 37 people have been diverted from the criminal justice system into treatment.

"This is truly a collaborative piece of work," Sini said.

He credited Gerard Gigante, chief of detectives, for pushing to create the pilot human-trafficking unit.

Helping victims has encouraged them to work with law enforcement, Sini said. "They have helped us put some bad people behind bars," he said.

The change is dramatic, he said. In the decade before the unit began working, five people were indicted on sex-trafficking charges, Sini said.

But since May 2017, he said nine people have been charged with 75 sex-trafficking counts, as well as another 90 counts on charges that include drug dealing, assault, stalking and menacing.

Sexual exploitation for profit does not look like the stereotype, said Jennifer Hernandez, executive director of

Empowerment Collaborative of Long Island, a group that advocates for victims.

"We are going to be saving countless lives through this initiative," she said.

Many people assume that traffickers trick victims into coming from Asia or South America, only to force them into prostitution. While that does happen, Hernandez said, it is far more common for both traffickers and those forced into prostitution to be local — and it happens in every neighborhood on Long Island.

In affluent or mostly white neighborhoods, Hernandez said victims often are heroin users deep in debt to their drug dealers, who collect by taking a cut of what the victims make in prostitution.

"Most of these victims are

young girls, 16-, 17-year-old girls into their 20s," Gigante said.

In minority communities, Hernandez said, the dynamic can be different. Sometimes family members sell children to support a drug habit, she said. In other cases, gangs sell women and girls as a source of income.

Hernandez and law enforcement officials, therefore, said attacking trafficking is also a way of attacking illegal drug dealing and gang activity.

Gigante said police also are alerting hotels and motels to what sexual trafficking looks like so they can call police if they see signs of it. Police also are monitoring social media, where women and girls are sometimes advertised.

"That was our original hook in," Gigante said.

DANIEL GOODRICH

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