



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
COUNTY OF TULARE

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“Hey, Mr. Ward, why is your name on the side of a bus?” That’s a question I was asked recently, and it’s one I’m happy to answer. But, truly, the real question should be: “Why is the District Attorney’s Office on buses, in newspaper, television, and radio ads and on billboards throughout the county?”

The answer is pretty simple, yet the subject matter of those ads can be quite complex because they tackle such topics as Elder Abuse, Driving Under the Influence, Worker’s Compensation Fraud and, most recently, Human Trafficking.

I’ve said it before and will again – human trafficking is a crime that hides in plain sight and we have to begin to realize just how horrible a crime it is. It’s modern day slavery, and that is why the District Attorney’s Office is putting these ads across our county.

January was designated Human Trafficking Awareness Month across the nation. This is not the first time I have addressed the issue of human trafficking and it certainly will not be the last. In fact, I think I first introduced this topic to Visalia Times Delta readers in 2014. That is the nature of bringing awareness to a topic – we tackle it multiple times through education, outreach, training and developing dialogue with our community on a subject.

Awareness means taking a look at how we view things and the words that we use. Think of the term “child prostitute.” A child cannot legally consent to sex. Yet for years children have been arrested for the crime of prostitution. We have thought of the customers as “johns,” not as child molesters or child rapists. Commercially sexually exploited children should not be treated differently than any other child who is the victim of a sex crime, yet we have treated them differently.

In the same line of thinking, why do we tolerate the word “pimp?” Somehow this verb has entered in to our common usage as a positive. It is not. Pimping is a horrible act that demeans and violates individuals. In a trafficking situation, pimping is literally collecting money for a human being sexually exploited against their will. Awareness can begin to put words like this back in their place.

What is our awareness of human trafficking?

Think about how we view the opportunities our nation offers her citizens and non-citizens to work. Now think about someone who has been trafficked here under the guise of a better life, yet their paperwork is held by someone else, and they are told they have to work off their debt before they can be free. This is labor trafficking.

Think about the young, educated girl next door who has all of a sudden cut ties with her close friends and instead favors, unwaveringly, the company of her older boyfriend. The boyfriend tells her he loves her, but makes her dance or perform sex acts with other men for money. This is sex trafficking.

Awareness can bring actual change in how we do things. Again, think of child prostitution. In 2013, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors changed its thinking of arrest and incarceration for sexually exploited children and instead directed county agencies to meet the needs of these children with community based services and support. In a number of pilot areas in the county, they have seen success in stabilizing children who have been exploited.

On every piece of material my office produces is our seal. Attorneys, investigators, and staff wear the seal on their lapels every day. At the absolute center of that seal is a torch that represents the illumination of justice. Television and radio ads, billboards, busses, print ads, outreach events, film screenings, and community forums that educate our fellow citizens is part of that illuminating light.

By being aware, and vigilant, you emit that light, too.

If you suspect a crime such a human trafficking is occurring, please contact your local law enforcement agency or the District Attorney's Bureau of Investigations immediately. Remember, you might just save a life.

Tim Ward
District Attorney