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ENDING SEX TRAFFICKING: WE'RE AT A CROSSROADS

It's simple economics: the rule of supply and demand. Buyers make a market profitable, and sellers capitalize on the market demand. When it comes to sex trafficking, the same principle applies.

You may think Iowa, the heartland of America, is a safe and tranquil place. But Iowa's centralized location lends itself to the dangers of trafficking as it's at the crossroads of a network of coast-to-coast interstate highways lined with truck stops, motels, casinos, and restaurants. Our rural countryside also creates the ideal environment for traffickers to operate largely undetected.

In the United States, sex trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Although boys and LGBTQ youths are increasingly targeted, nearly 90 percent of reported trafficking cases involve females, and more than half of Iowa's cases involve minors. The average age a child enters the world of sex trafficking is adolescence – the age of girls Chrysalis Foundation serves in our After-School programs.

Research has identified the risk factors of vulnerable children to include few social supports, history of sexual abuse or physical abuse, and/or involvement in foster care or juvenile detention. According to the Iowa Attorney General, one out of three runaway teens is approached for commercial sex within their first 36 hours on the streets. Recruitment happens at schools, bus stations, shopping centers, and homeless shelters.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has amplified sex trafficking. Virtual learning requires kids to spend more time on the internet, where unsuspecting victims may find new "friends." And increasing stresses on families leave the usual safety nets lacking, as children are more often alone and unsupervised resulting from canceled extracurricular programs and sports. In addition, community services that typically provide adults the opportunity to notice warning signs of abuse are temporarily closed.

As an organization working to empower girls and women in our state and nation, Chrysalis works with other women's foundations across the globe to address the systems and norms that lead girls into entrapment, including the media's sexualization of young girls, the glamorization of the "pimp" culture, and the abuse that drives a girl from home.

Chrysalis also builds public awareness, educates professionals working with youths and parents, equips girls and women with strategies for prevention of abuse, and connects with colleagues and organizations that help to intensify our focus.

At Chrysalis, we know that problems and solutions are often found in the same place, and to address community problems, we need to address problems as a community. For this reason, we are continuously learning from and partnering with multiple agencies, government officials, and local leaders who share our concern for the well-being of girls and women.

But we need even more partnerships, awareness and involvement by many in order to combat this massive issue. Whether it is volunteering for organizations that help at-risk youth, or donating to financially support efforts to end sex trafficking, every one of us need to play a part in ending this vile industry. We need more voices. We need more action. We owe it to ourselves, our children and the world's youths to make something happen NOW for the futures of many. How will you help?

Here's what you can do to end human trafficking:

1. Know the signs and indicators of trafficking.
2. Share information on trafficking with friends and family.
3. Support local prevention and awareness efforts.
4. If you see something, say something - call 9-1-1 or the National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888.

