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Profile

TAMPA-- A boat being towed down the interstate could be holding hostage to over a dozen human trafficking victims and no one would ever know. Catching smugglers in the act, using tactics like this and more, is a job for some.

Anna Rodriguez, the founder of the Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking, says that 27 million victims are trafficked around the world and 2.5 million of them are estimated to be in the United States. Florida has the second largest percentage of sufferers in the country.

Traffickers have been apprehended transporting victims into the United States through many different procedures.

Several casualties have been found sewn inside car seats. A special agent describes this as one of the more humorous attempts.

“You can see the outline of a body there and they don’t think they’ll be caught,” said Bill Williger, a special agent for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Even with the use of more clever practices, Williger and his fellow agents are still recovering many potential victims.

Once, he dismantled a boat and found the traffickers had disposed of all of the foam inside the v-shaped bottom hull panel so as many people as possible could be crammed inside under the deck.

That day, Williger saved over a dozen people.

Gullible hostages are told by their shippers that ICE agents will send them to jail and deport their families if they are found.

ICE is a law enforcement agency. Their mission is to protect America and maintain public safety by targeting people that support terrorist and criminal activities.

Clearwater Task Force Detective James McBride remembers a woman from Guatemala who was brought into Florida with the knowledge she was going to work as a maid. Once in the state, the woman's smuggling debt was raised and she was forced into prostitution by her trafficker.

When the detective tried to rescue the women, "She thought we were going to kill her."

"They don't know the truth," Williger said.

If ICE agents are recognized, victims would never speak to them.

Williger said a victim once recognized him in a mission and ran away when she saw him. Apparently, a videographer got Williger in a news spot and she remembered him.

Each agent has been taught to hide from the media while in uniform. Editors are told to blur their faces out of all published pictures and videos.

"A victim is the most important piece of evidence and if they won't talk we got nothing. No victim, no crime," McBride said.

Agents must gain the trust and respect of a victim before revealing themselves. After doing so, many victims still quiet themselves immediately and no longer cooperate.

When this happens, Williger depends on others, sometimes females of the same ethnicity and background as the victim, to extract needed information from them.

Citizens can also be a big help locating both victims and traffickers.

On May 10, 2009, a water front home in Pinellas County was found imprisoning several human trafficking victims. These young girls were told they would be given money, security and shelter, but were soon forced into a life of prostitution.

Kenyatta Cornelous, 38, Edward Jones, 47, and Corinna Shaffer, 24, were arrested for running the operation.

While several victims have been found, investigators say others may be too scared to come forward.

“[Human trafficking] is a hidden crime and could be happening right next door to you without your having knowledge of it. We need the help of citizens to be watchful and to report any concerns,” said Dolly Warden, coordinator of World Relief Tampa.