



*Human Trafficking Awareness  
For Youth in Central Iowa  
White Paper presented by  
uVoice, a Community Youth Concepts program  
with support from  
Mid Iowa Health Foundation & Delta Dental of Iowa*

## **Introduction**

uVoice, a youth philanthropy board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts, consists of a group of twelve students who live in the Des Moines metro area. Bimonthly, these students come together to identify issues facing youth in their community and to combat these identified issues through a grant-making process. uVoice members research community needs, develop a grant application, review responses to their request for proposals, and allocate dollars to non-profit organizations they believe are addressing the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice through their community needs assessment and Data Walk activity.

In previous years, uVoice has focused on topics relating to mental health, stress, suicide prevention, and substance use and abuse. This year, uVoice members chose to focus on the often overlooked topic of human trafficking.

## **Background**

According to the Department of Homeland Security, “Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.”<sup>1</sup> uVoice students agreed that a lack of knowledge and awareness about human trafficking was present among their peers, and that schools and community resources were not advertising and addressing this issue facing youth in Polk county. The group felt that while human trafficking is a pressing issue in the United States, youth in our area are not at all educated on the topic, which jeopardizes the safety of youth in the area. Understanding that the board’s knowledge on human trafficking was underdeveloped and not representative of all facets of human trafficking, they expanded their knowledge by hosting an expert panel to learn more about the subject. As a result, the uVoice board was better able to understand the causes and consequences of human trafficking in Polk county and was better able to target their grant process to underlying factors contributing to human trafficking.

## **Community Needs Findings**

The expert panel brought together a group of diverse professionals that shared their unique perspectives about human trafficking. The panel consisted of Detective Jennifer Westlake with Des Moines Police Department, Jaki Livingston with the Polk County Attorney’s Office, documentary filmmaker Vanessa McNeal, Jill Schacherer with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Kellie Markey with Dorothy’s House, and Mary Kate Leister with Teens Against Human Trafficking. uVoice students prepared a list of questions to ask the experts in order to learn more about human trafficking. Some of the most meaningful things they learned as a result of the expert panel included:

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>

- Human trafficking victims are primarily girls and the average age of victims is 12-16 years old.
- Iowa, and Des Moines in particular, is one of the biggest transit points for human trafficking in the United States. This is due to a variety of reasons including the crossing of major interstates (interstate 80 and interstate 35) as well as big events like the Iowa State Fair, the NCAA tournament, 80/35 Music Festival, and the Des Moines Farmer's Market. The problem is compounded by the fact that human trafficking is still under identified and under reported.
- Human trafficking doesn't always start with kidnapping - often victims are trafficked by family, friends, or romantic partners.
- Victims of human trafficking come from all different backgrounds, education levels, incomes, personality types, etc. There is no "typical victim."
- As children and youth are becoming increasingly tech savvy, so are traffickers. Middle and high school students need to be aware of how traffickers use social media and online gaming as grooming tools.
- Human trafficking is extremely common and yet it is not something that is rarely discussed. With nearly 25 million people being trafficked in the United States, it is likely that we all know someone connected to human trafficking.

Other important information that uVoice learned during the Expert Panel was what to do if you see a suspected human trafficking situation. All of the panelists weighed in on this question and below is a compilation of their responses.

- Look for absence of normal, because you will probably notice if something is wrong.
- If you suspect someone you know is in a trafficking situation, ask them if they are okay. Encourage them to talk to a counselor or reach out to resources like Dorothy's House. Be prepared for this to be a complicated conversation because often victims do not understand the manipulation and coercion that they are being controlled by.
- Call the Iowa hotline at 1-800-770-1650 or text "IOWAHELP" to 20121. Or call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline, toll-free, at 1-888-373-7888.
- Don't approach someone if you don't know them, you may be putting yourself in danger. Call your local law enforcement agency by dialing 911 and reporting what you see.

## **Discussion**

After learning more about human trafficking in Iowa, the board had a broader discussion about how likely we are to interact with someone connected to the cycle of human trafficking. This means that as we go about our daily routine we are very likely to cross paths with someone who might be involved with human trafficking as a victim, trafficker, or buyer. One panelist added that "the general population doesn't know how often [human trafficking] happens, and if they did, they would be horrified."

It is important to educate youth about this topic considering that the majority of people who experience trafficking start at these younger ages. The uVoice students learned that the national average entry age is 12 to 14 years old. One of our panelists, Vanessa McNeal, relayed an anecdote where she asked a class of fifth graders if they had ever been approached by a stranger online: all of them said they had. Considering the vast internet access that children and youth have, it is our responsibility to educate

parents and trusted adults about the online games and social media websites on which youth can be taken advantage of and potentially sucked into a human trafficking ring.

We also learned the importance of the language that is used when discussing this topic, in particular the use of the word “victim.” Many people involved in human trafficking do not consider themselves victims or they do not recognize that they are victims. It was also discovered that many instances of human trafficking occur within personal relationships, instead of the situation being a random kidnapping. Often women are coerced into trafficking by partners, family members, or friends. Now, when people want to help someone who is being trafficked, they use phrases like “Do you feel trapped?”, “Are you safe?”, or “Looking for a way out?” in order to reach out to those who don’t consider themselves “victims” of human trafficking.

### **Projects Funded**

The board published a Request for Proposals seeking to fund a nonprofit that worked to promote systemic change that aids and supports victims of human trafficking as well as to educate the public about warning signs and prevention of human trafficking. Such a program might include human trafficking education for middle and high school students, education for parents and teachers about discussing these topics with students, resources and support for victims, promotion of ways to stay safe and prevent trafficking, and/or student-led advocacy regarding human trafficking.

This year uVoice split their funding between Dorothy’s House and Des Moines Young Artists Theater (DMYAT). Dorothy’s House provides a safe place for survivors of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. They believe every survivor has a unique set of needs and personal goals. They help meet these goals by providing resources to support mental well being, job skills, community engagement, and education/employment opportunity. uVoice awarded Dorothy’s house a \$2,500 grant to establish a garden for girls who have been trafficked to take part in the therapeutic activity of gardening. This garden will also be self sustainable and will generate profit over time to be used to cover costs for this nonprofit.

Des Moines Young Artists’ Theatre is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating young leaders and bringing light to issues within the community through their plays. uVoice awarded Des Moines Young Artists’ Theatre a \$2,500 to support their HOPE Troupe program. Each year, up to 25 of their students grades 8-12 attend a three-day, educational retreat to inform them about different types of abuse and the effects on victims. After the retreat, the students write a 25-minute play and perform at schools and organizations around the area, hoping to reach around 3,000 people. For 2019-2020, the topic of their play is going to be human trafficking, in order to educate the students as well as the community on the negative effects of human trafficking.

### **Recommendations**

The Dorothy’s House garden and the DMYAT plays will be a valuable addition to Polk County’s human trafficking resources by improving the lives of those affected by human trafficking and educating the general public on a lesser known topic. Our community needs assessment showcased the lack of knowledge and the need for education about this topic. Our goal was to broaden the public’s awareness of available human trafficking programs in the county. The grants given to these organizations will allow for increased understanding of what human trafficking is, who it affects, and how it affects youth in the Polk county area.

However, the work is not done. Community dollars and resources should be directed to both prevention to educate the public about human trafficking; and programs and resources to help those who have been affected by trafficking. Prevention includes funding programs that educate youth about human trafficking, the warning signs, and how to help friends who they suspect are in trafficking relationships. This is vital because youth are more likely to talk to a peer than to an adult about any relationship or situations that they find themselves in. This could be modeled like the teen Mental Health First Aid training which, “teaches high school students about common mental health challenges and what they can do to support their own mental health and help a friend who is struggling. It’s equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to foster their own wellness and to support each other.”<sup>2</sup> If youth feel comfortable approaching these difficult conversations, then they may be able to help friends get out of a bad situation before they get too deep into the cycle of human trafficking.

Not only is it important to educate teens about human trafficking, but educators and youth-serving adults need to be included in the conversation. No one sees more students than our public schools so educating teachers and counselors on the warning signs of human trafficking can help identify students who may be at-risk. If human trafficking training is a requirement for all school staff, students could approach anyone at their school that they trust to confide in.

In addition to prevention work, resources and funding also need to be directed to helping people who have experienced trafficking. This is a pervasive problem in our community and it is likely that everyone knows someone connected to human trafficking either a victim, a buyer, or a trafficker. Individuals who have experienced trafficking can thrive given the right support and tools. Multidisciplinary approaches are needed to provide holistic support including: mental health resources, job skills and training, housing, and education.

By funding Des Moines Young Artist Theater and Dorothy’s House, uVoice modeled this two-pronged approach to combat human trafficking. Prevention efforts will help lower the rates of human trafficking, and support services for victims will help uplift vulnerable people in our community. With everyone doing their part, our communities will be stronger, safer, and healthier.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/teens>