Human Trafficking: A Hospital Systems’ Call to Action and Their Response

Johnie Leonard, MSN, RN, CEN, NE-BC, Emergency Services Director
Kimberley DuBose, FACHE, MBA, MIOP, PMP, CMP Emergency Services Operations Manager
Melissa Graham, RN
Houston Methodist Hospital, Houston, Texas

Purpose
Human trafficking is a modern day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. It is a $150 billion global industry that robs 25 million people around the world of their freedom states Polaris, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing human trafficking. The group calls for greater awareness of community and strong partnership from health care professionals to address the growing problem of adults and children working against their will. In addition, with Houston, Texas so close to the Mexico border and an international hub for travel, the need for a strategy to address is further compounded.

Strategy and Implementation
At the beginning of 2018, the Houston Methodist Hospital System had no policy, nor awareness for Human Trafficking in Houston, Texas, but the impetus was very strongly present to address. To meet this call to action, Houston Methodist Hospital System developed a 5 pronged approach to meet the need.

Interjection of General Employee Awareness
A pre assessment showed that neither clinical nor nonclinical employees soundly realized that our patients could be victims, let alone did they know what to do if a potential victim was identified. To stimulate awareness the establishment of a formal Human Trafficking Committee and a National Slavery and Human Trafficking Day was planned for the hospital system, including booths from various organizations that work with victims of human trafficking in order to give employees a chance to ask questions and get involved.

Development of Policy
The Human Trafficking Committee’s first step after bolstering general awareness was to then create a policy for the masses to reference in their quest. In August, the CEO of the system underscored the importance of this committee’s efforts on awareness and policy generation by emailing all employees about the undertaking. Referencing works by others in the community, such as AHA and other hospitals in the Texas Medical Center with who collaborations were underway, an internal policy was drafted and presented for approval with unveiling as part of the National Slavery and Human Trafficking Day in January 2019.

Established of Guidelines
After a policy was drafted, it was necessary to provide in more comprehensive guidelines around how to identify a victim and what to do from that point forward. For example, there may be a negative and powerful psychological dependency that a victim may have on captors that are in attendance with the patient seeking care. Situations such as this need clear instructions on how to handle with the safety of all in mind. Thus, the guidance descriptive enough to address was established.

Development of Focused Education and Action Steps
With a policy and guidelines in hand, the next step is to address gaps in the education of all employees of Houston Methodist Hospitals around the topic of Human Trafficking. Healthcare professionals must be trained in how to recognize a potential victim and what to do once a potential victim is recognized. This training is team approach with social work, security, chaplains, housekeepers, nurses and doctors working together.

Institution of Community Partnerships
To ensure that up to date information and resources are in place for usage by the rescuer and the victim, the establishment of concrete partnerships in the community are of utmost importance. Victims, once identified, will need support mechanisms to help the individual(s) get out and get reestablish themselves on good footing beyond the hospital setting (i.e. housing, education/job, legal assistance, healthcare assistance). If not done, then there is high probability that the victim will slip back into the human trafficking system that although not desired, is what gives them the basic life needs required. To this end, Houston Medical Center has developed the Human Trafficking Consortium to develop networks with others working with Human Trafficking victims.

Evaluation/Outcomes
In the last year, much has been accomplished at the Houston Methodist Hospital System. A Human Trafficking Committee has been established, a policy designed, unveiled and adopted at a National Slavery and Human Trafficking Day planned for the hospital system. In August, the CEO of the system underscored the importance of this committee’s efforts on awareness and policy generation by emailing all employees about the undertaking, which led to high volumes emails inquiring about the committee and Human Trafficking internally. Externally, local news stations and community papers have interviewed the Human Trafficking committee members, which has led to further advocacy of the issue. One positive that came of this, in particular, is an alignment with the Human Trafficking Consortium in the Houston Medical Center. This committee is a network of healthcare providers, community recovery resources and legal support mechanisms aimed at breaking the chain of human trafficking. Houston Methodist Hospital has also met several times with the American Hospital Association (AHA) to further both parties’ knowledge resources sharing training tools and references to expedite the educational focus at the hospital and for the AHA membership at large. At Houston Methodist, a learning module for hospital employees system-wide on human trafficking will be rolled out with the annual competency trainings in that all staff must complete. In terms of the strengthening of resources already established, further efforts are planned in 2019 to broaden the list of available legal support and shelters referenced in the area and developing further means to meet needs around long term psychiatric care. In order to be successful long term and keep victims free from returning to their negative environments, it is critical that individuals are set up to care for themselves and their dependents mentally, physically and financially.

Implications for Practice
Human Trafficking is both a criminal act as well as a human rights violation. It affects us locally, nationally and world-wide. It affects every age, race, and religion. It affects us as an organization and as individuals. There are many that can take this one step further and say that they or someone they know too have had experience in this realm. Because of its ability to touch everyone, it is the onus of healthcare workers to take advantage of the singular opportunity to change someone’s life. The call to action is for others to tread either at our shoulder or in our footfall to accomplish the same objectives at their respective sites. All humans are valuable and all humans are accountable for ensuring that value is self-preserved.