

## Seminar focuses on human trafficking in Tar Heel state

DURHAM -- Thousands of men, women and children in North Carolina may be victims of human trafficking, a UNC Chapel Hill expert said Wednesday afternoon at a seminar on the subject.

"We don't see it because we're not taught what to look for," Donna Bickford told an audience of about 60 people hosted by Durham County's Department of Social Services.

Bickford, the director of the Carolina Women's Center at UNC, acknowledged that there are no reliable numbers on trafficking. But she believes that 15,000 to 20,000 people a year may be brought into the nation annually by use of force, fraud or coercion.

Citing information from the FBI's Charlotte field office, she said that North Carolina is a top-10 state for trafficking. That's because it is a frequent destination for immigrants, home to large military bases and the host of I-95 and other major highways.

The military seems to attract trafficking because bases often attract sex workers, Bickford said. But trafficking victims, who needn't be foreign, can also be forced to labor for restaurants, farms and factories. They may be locked up with other victims, stripped of money and identity documents, and threatened with harm to themselves or their families.

The problem is hard to deal with for various reasons, including the fact that victims frequently don't realize that they have been subjected to criminal acts.

Bickford believes that a key is training police officers about trafficking. "The law enforcement personnel are the ones who are most likely to be in the places where they can identify and protect potential victims," she said.

Representatives of both the Durham police and sheriff's departments were at the seminar. Sheriff's Lt. S.E. Harris told the group that he has seen signs of significant trafficking in Durham.

Others said they had also encountered indications of trafficking. When one attendee wondered aloud about the status of immigrant workers in beauty salons, people in the room nodded in agreement.

Another seminar attendee was RTI research psychologist Michelle Kaufman. She has studied trafficking in Asia and is turning her eye toward domestic labor trafficking.

"I think a lot of people in the U.S. don't want to acknowledge the fact that it happens right here in our own back yards -- that it's much more common than we want to admit," Kaufman said.

Kaufman couldn't say whether trafficking for labor is more prevalent than that involving sexual exploitation. "Labor trafficking is so much harder to identify," she said.

Groups are gearing up to combat the problem, Bickford said. The international women's group Soroptimist is promoting anti-trafficking efforts in 2009. The group behind the Web site [stopchildtraffickingnow.org](http://stopchildtraffickingnow.org) is arranging anti-trafficking walks around the nation. And legislation co-sponsored by local state Sens. Ellie Kinnaird, Bob Atwater and Floyd McKissick would raise the issue's profile by appointing a commission.

In its own way, Wednesday's seminar was itself an act of opposition to trafficking. Bickford and two **Legal Aid of North Carolina employees** (LANC staff attorneys **Hope Williams** and **Rachel Braver**) discussed Web sites and telephone hotlines that police, social workers and others can turn to when they suspect or identify trafficking.

"When you can get people who are going to be working on the front lines, people who are going to be the first and second responders, to have 60 of them in a room like this is incredible," Bickford said after the seminar.