

Federal officials: Human trafficking a pervasive problem

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The hazards of farm work hit home last year when three people were arrested in Alachua County and charged with enslaving Haitian workers for several years. The case is scheduled to be heard in federal court later this year.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials said the scheme involved persuading 34 workers to travel from their native Haiti to Florida to take jobs the suspects allegedly told them were well-paying.

Once the group arrived in Florida, officials said the suspects confiscated the workers' passports and forced them to work on farms by threatening to report them to local agencies or threatening to have them deported to face their unpaid debts for their recruitment fees.

Carline Bontemps Ceneus, 32, of Miami; her brother Cabioch Bontemps, 34, of Lacrosse; and Willy Paul Edouard, 47, of Miami, were arrested after being indicted on charges of conspiring to commit forced labor and visa fraud. Ceneus also was charged with document servitude.

Susan McCormick, special agent in charge of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in 58 of Florida's 67 counties, said that while she could not address the Alachua County case specifically, she could say human trafficking is a growing problem worldwide.

"Outside of narcotics trafficking, human trafficking is one of the largest activities in the United States and globally, and that's because the profit can be amazing," McCormick said.

In addition to collecting fees that can amount to tens of thousands of U.S. dollars per worker to transport them to a place where they have been told there will be good-paying jobs, human traffickers also collect the wages made by the workers, effectively enslaving them.

The U.S. State Department estimates there are 12 million people globally who are in an exploited position of some sort.

McCormick said identifying victims can be extraordinarily difficult. Victims usually are taken to a place relatively far from their home with no firm plans on how they will return.

“Once they are out of their own environment, possibly taken to a foreign country where they may not speak the language, the people who arranged for their travel may hold their passport and visa, making it impossible for them to go anywhere else,” McCormick said.

In the case of women — and sometimes children — who become part of the sex trade, organizers try to move them every couple of months to avoid detection.

Often, neighbors’ reports about children not attending school and other unusual behavior will tip investigators off, McCormick said.

“It’s really a restriction of movement — someone who doesn’t want the other people with them to have any contact with the outside world,” she said. “There is no one answer, no one clue, but if you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, call the authorities and let them check it out.”

The alleged scheme locally was discovered when Alachua County Sheriff’s Detective Tyson Elliott received a tip from a nongovernmental social services provider, who noticed the workers’ basic needs were not being met. (Tyson is now the statewide human trafficking coordinator for the Department of Children and Families.)

The farm’s owner, Steven Davis, said he was participating in a federal program, known as the H-2A program, to legally hire seasonal workers.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the H-2A temporary agricultural program establishes a means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring non-immigrant foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor, or services of a temporary or seasonal nature for no longer than one year.

Davis said federal workers were monitoring him throughout his participation in the program and that they found no wrongdoing of the magnitude with which his contractors have been charged.

“We didn’t do any of this wrong,” Davis said. “We’re not guilty of any of these charges. We have done none of these bad things.”

Davis, 38, described himself as a small farmer — not a large corporation — now on the verge of bankruptcy after the arrests were made.

The trial of those charged, originally scheduled for December 2010, is now scheduled to take place in October.

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