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Rescue Mission offers emergency shelter to human trafficking survivors

Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil



A bedroom used to house survivors of human trafficking at the Orange County Rescue Mission. The room is a feature of the Village of Hope program, which helps provide a safe and stable environment for traumatized victims. (Courtesy of the Orange County Rescue Mission)

A new program to support female survivors of human trafficking in Orange County has become the a first-of-its-kind emergency shelter.

Strong Beginnings, opened this summer by the Orange County Rescue Mission, offers four emergency shelter beds as well as services specifically tailored for survivors of human trafficking, such as healthcare, case management and education assistance.

“My biggest goal for them is to not only feel safe, but to actually be safe and secure, and not feel like they have to go back into the life and make money to have enough to survive and live,” said Samantha Eitner, case manager for Strong Beginnings.

For years the county has offered survivors services, such as temporary housing, food, clothing, transportation, court support and life-skill building, but prior to Strong Beginnings, there was nowhere for emergency placement.

This posed a problem, said Linh Tran, administrator of the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, since many survivors are identified in the middle of the night and need immediate safety at a time when when other shelters are unavailable for intake.

"Prior to Strong Beginnings, if we were unable to get a victim in a shelter program right away, our only option would have been to place her temporarily in a motel," said Tran, who explained that the task force tries to avoid this option since motels are often where trafficking happens and can be re-traumatizing for survivors.

"So we're hoping that Strong Beginnings fills the missing gap in our county's response."

According to the task force's most recent numbers, it assisted 284 human trafficking survivors in 2016, an increase since it first started collecting data in 2010.

While most of the survivors are U.S. citizens, 78% are from outside Orange County, according to the task force's 2016 victim report. As a result, one of the most commonly requested services from the county is transportation assistance.

For those who choose to stay in Orange County, Strong Beginnings also offers a set of services designed for survivors of human trafficking.

One of the most important, said Eitner, is recovering any documentation that may have been lost or stolen, without which survivors can't apply for Medi-Cal, or even get a job or rent an apartment.

"A lot of times traffickers hold that driver's license or birth certificate so the women feel like they can't leave," she said. "It's a bargaining chip."

Strong Beginnings also offers an on-site high school diploma program and therapy — steps that Eitner said will help survivors to become self-sufficient, with the goal of having survivors find a job or training program, as well as their own housing.

Offering these resources, she said, will help survivors address the deeper issues in their lives — such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression — or achieve their personal or career goals.

"I've had some of my survivors say, 'I've never had a situation where I felt safe enough to get to the rooted issue,'" said Eitner.

"So for them to come to a place where they no longer have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, where their next shower is coming from, where their clothes are coming from — it allows them to get to those root issues. And those are some of the first steps towards freedom."

Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil left Times Community News in 2017. She is a graduate of Northwestern University and Harvard Divinity School and a former U.S. Fulbright scholar to Sri Lanka. She has previously written for newspapers and magazines in Boston, Washington, DC, and Northern California. In 2011, she won a National Health Journalism Fellowship from the University of Southern California, and in 2014 was awarded an Emerging Journalist Fellowship by the Journalism and Women Symposium.