

Orange County opens first-ever emergency program for female human trafficking survivors



A bedroom used to house survivors of human trafficking at the Orange County Rescue Mission. (Orange County Rescue Mission)

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A first-of-its-kind emergency program to support female survivors of human trafficking opened in Orange County this summer, offering shelter beds as well as specially tailored healthcare, case management and education assistance services.

“My biggest goal for them is to ... be safe and secure, and not feel like they have to go back into the life and make money to have enough to survive,” said Samantha Eitner, case manager for Strong Beginnings. The program currently has four beds set aside at the Orange County Rescue Mission.

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

That posed a problem, said Linh Tran, administrator of the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, because many immediate safety at a time when other shelters are unavailable

“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, explaining that the task force tries to avoid that option since motels often are where trafficking happens and can be re-traumatizing.

“So we’re hoping that Strong Beginnings fills the missing gap in our county’s response.”

According to the task force’s most recent report, it assisted 284 human trafficking victims in 2016. Most were U.S. citizens, and 78% were from outside Orange County. 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 assistance. One of the most important services, Eitner said, is helping to recover any documentation that may have been lost or stolen, without which the victims can’t apply for Medi-Cal, 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 them find a job or training program, as well as their own housing.

Offering these resources, she said, will help address the deeper issues in the victims’ lives — such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression — as well as 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,’” Eitner said.

“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 toward freedom.”

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