

Human Trafficking is a form of modern day slavery. At \$150B profit annually¹, the business of exploiting vulnerable women, men, and children in conditions of sexual and labor servitude is the third largest criminal industry in the world². This crime is pervasive in Chicago communities and destroys lives of some of our most vulnerable. It has become evident to Junior League of Chicago, through research and meetings with local stakeholders who wish to end human trafficking and to help survivors, that our volunteers must join the F.I.H.T.

In 2007, Lt. Paul Kusinski of the Chicago Police Trafficking Team stated, "It would be naive to think that human trafficking is not occurring here in Cook County". In 2003, The New York Times labeled Chicago as a national hub for human trafficking and, in 2005, the FBI designated Chicago as one of thirteen locations of "High Intensity Child Prostitution". Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, because of its strategic location and importance, is considered a highly-used transit location by traffickers to transport victims and disperse them as needed to other cities and states. Traffickers seize opportunities for increased profits by trafficking greater numbers of women for sexual exploitation into Chicago during events where the city is filled with large numbers of spectators and tourists. In metropolitan Chicago, 16,000 to 25,000 women and girls are involved in commercial sex trade annually, with one third of them first getting involved in prostitution by the age of 15 years, and 62% by the age of 18 years. Traffickers use fraud, deception, coercion, threats and force to transport, harbor or obtain people to perform commercial sex or labor acts against their will.³

Junior League of Chicago recognizes the severe impact of human trafficking on the well-being of women, men, and children in Chicago. Therefore, we are committing to awareness efforts, public education, development of strategic partnerships and networks with other community organizations, and finding solutions for victims to have greater access to the services and resources they need to exit that life.

In 2016, JLC officially organized a new project to begin our work tied to human trafficking in Chicago: F.I.H.T (Freeing Individuals from Human Trafficking.) This committee has established a partnership with Chicago-based, non-profit Traffick Free (TF). TF is seeking to close the largest gap in victim services: emergency services. Through this partnership, F.I.H.T is supporting TF in opening Chicago's first low-demand overnight drop-in center in February 2017. F.I.H.T members have cleaned, painted, moved-in furniture, and set up the drop-in space that will serve all adult women who are commercially sexually exploited in our city. As the drop-in center prepares to open, F.I.H.T members will engage in a variety of educational exercises to understand the issue and receive training on how to properly interact with trafficking victims for in-center volunteer positions with TF. In addition to the JLC's partnership with Traffick Free, F.I.H.T is networking and volunteering with other local organizations seeking to eliminate human trafficking. These organization include: The Salvation Army's STOP-IT Program, Saleh Freedom, and Fourth Presbyterian Church's Sunlight Project. Further, F.I.H.T. has accepted a seat on the Cook County Task Force Training Subcommittee. For the remaining 2016-2017 year, F.I.H.T. is preparing a film screening event, JLCU programs, and human trafficking fact sheets. These initiatives are intended to educate members internally, to heighten public awareness externally, and to cultivate our voice as advocates for the passing of legislation that penalizes traffickers and that protects children and youth who become victims.

F.I.H.T. committee members recognize the depth and breadth of this complex human rights issue globally. And, we concur with our Board and the Association of Junior Leagues International that our mission calls for our participation in the fight against human trafficking - this “new slavery” - in our community. F.I.H.T member Meghan Hansen shares, “I believe that human trafficking is the type of issue that once you become aware of how widespread and devastating it is, you want to do something. I am proud of how the Junior League has approached the issue - focusing on education, volunteerism with key partners in the community and working with advocacy - to educate our members and have the greatest impact possible. My favorite experience so far has been working with our partners on their projects - setting up the drop-in center for Traffick Free and helping with the clothes drive for STOP-IT. I think that Junior League is in a unique position to provide surge capacity volunteers to meaningful projects and I am excited to see where we will take this new committee in the coming years.”

Sources:

¹ <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/226850.pdf>

² <https://leb.fbi.gov/2011/march/human-sex-trafficking>

³ http://www.traffickfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/TF_Trafficking_Fact_Sheet.pdf



January 2016 - Left to right: Megan Glynn, Meghan Hansen, Lindsey Wright at preparing Traffick Free's Drop In Center for opening.



December 2016 - Meghan Hansen, Amanda Stasinski, Melissa Hansen, Tracy Walter at organizing donated clothes at STOP-IT Drop In Center.