

Human trafficking is happening in Halton

By Kathryn Boyle
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Young, school-aged girls from 13-18 have been led to a dangerous life of sexual exploitation in the form of human trafficking, and it's happening in the Halton Region.

These girls are next-door neighbours. They are babysitters. They are classmates. And they are being exploited.

These girls aren't strangers to our community. In fact, 93 per cent of trafficked survivors are from Canada.

To combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation of these young girls, Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Services of Halton is working alongside the Halton Collaborative Against Human Trafficking to help educate service providers on what steps to take when handling a case in relation to human trafficking.

"There's this idea perpetuated by the media that trafficked

individuals are those who get smuggled across borders and come from other countries," HCAHT program co-ordinator Cindy Stover said. "In the Halton Region, police are finding overwhelmingly it is local Canadian girls who are being trafficked."

The government of Ontario defines human trafficking as "a criminal offense that involves recruiting, transporting, transferring, receiving, concealing, or harbouring a person, or exercising control, direction or influence over the movement of a person for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation." This encompasses labour trafficking as well.

Trafficking is a long game. According to Stover, it occurs most commonly at the 401 and 403 highways because of the access to hotels, and there are many ways young girls can be groomed for trafficking.

"There are so many ways that an individual can be groomed for purposes of sexual exploitation," Stover said, noting the girls

who are targeted normally have obvious vulnerabilities to begin with, including a history of being in care, they have a history of substance abuse, instability in their families or are battling mental illnesses.

"They get targeted by traffickers who are trying to set up this 'boyfriend experience.' They tell them they're beautiful and everything they've ever wanted to hear and they're going to take them away from this terrible situation and love them forever.

"It really is this horrible manipulation of playing on the insecurities that so many young girls go through," Stover said. "There's this idea that traffickers intentionally prey on those vulnerabilities and use that to trap a girl and have her think he's her boyfriend and she'd do anything for him. It's at that point that he does ask her to do anything, and that's where the manipulation and the force comes in."

Stover said the girl may offer to comply in the beginning, but violence may be introduced into

the situation should she decide to back out.

Trafficking and independent sex work is a careful distinction to make, Stover said. The steps in determining whether or not a girl is being trafficked or is an independent sex worker boils down to two decisions regarding independence and consent.

"Is the person actually independently making choices to be involved in sex work or are they being forced to with somebody else controlling their movement?" Stover said.

"Then there's the idea of consent: are they choosing to be involved in this, is this something they want to do? Or is someone forcing them to do it?"

If the person who comes forward wants to do independent sex work, SAVIS and the collaborate will work with them to keep them safe by taking harm reducing precautions, such as creating a safety plan and providing the person with contraceptives and tests for sexually transmitted infections (STI). Continued on page 8



By Cory Soal
 R.H.A.D.

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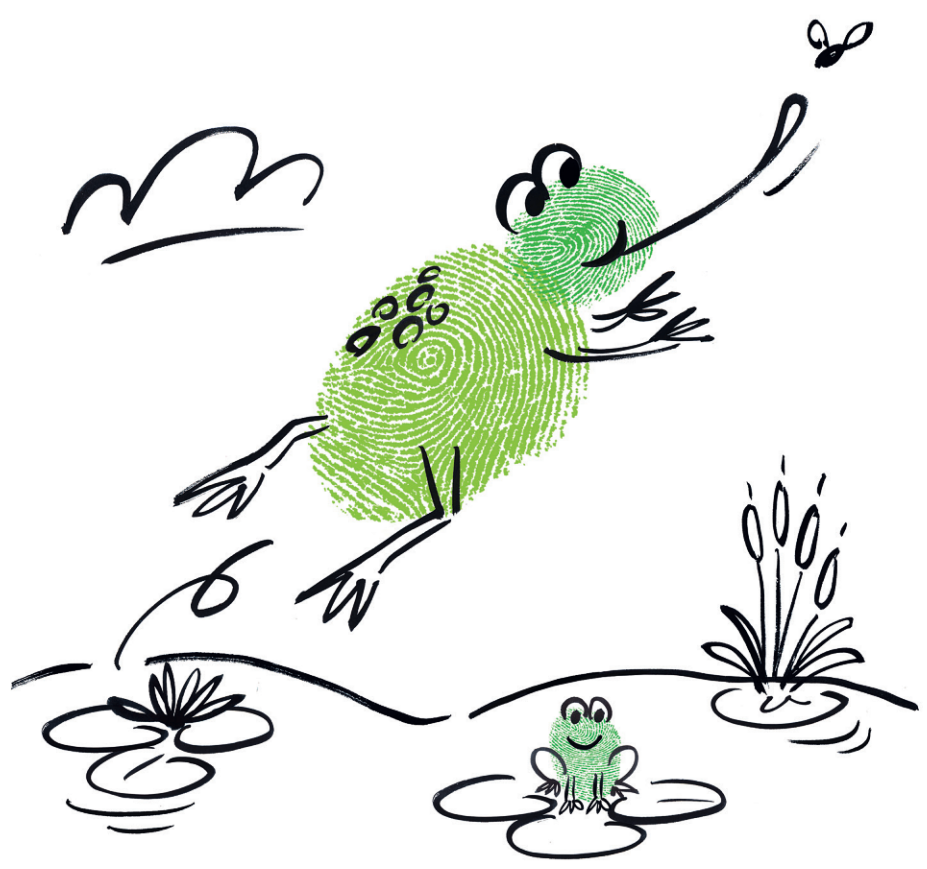
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