



**ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE EDUCATES HUNDREDS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ON RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**  
*Aligning with state youth health curriculum, student education addresses recent trafficking data indicating 40% – or 2 out of 5 – victims of sex trafficking are minors*

**COSTA MESA, Calif. (January 30, 2025)** – Today the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF), in collaboration with 28 local resource organizations including the OC Department of Education and OC Superior Court, brought together more than 500 students between the ages 12 to 14 from 22 middle schools in Anaheim, Fullerton and Santa Ana School Districts to receive education on how to recognize the signs and dangers of human trafficking. Two new schools joined this year including the Samueli Academy.

Due to the concerning fact that two out of five sex trafficking victims are minors, the OCHTTF, in partnership with government and community-based nonprofits, implemented this event to prevent and protect local youths from becoming victims. This youth-focused event first began in 2023 following the release of the [OCHTTF Victim Report](#), which indicated that female minor victims of sex trafficking make up the second largest group of all human trafficking victims identified in Orange County at 32% and male minor victims of sex trafficking at 4%.

Aligning with the California Health Youth Act (CHYA), this “Know More, Do Better 3.0” conference took place in Vanguard University’s Waugh Student Center to help support the schools in providing all middle school-aged students with prevention education, which includes human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation as one of the curriculum expectations. Representatives from other counties were present to observe so that they may implement this type of program in their local schools.

Sex trafficking is a very specific and devastating kind of human trafficking, defined as the act of manipulating or forcing anyone into situations of sexual exploitation and commercial sex acts. What often arises from the simple, human need for connection, sex traffickers present themselves as confidants to vulnerable children and young teens who believe they have no one else to turn to.

"Educating our youth about the dangers and signs of human trafficking and sexual exploitation is crucial to preventing these crimes, and more importantly, in empowering them to protect themselves and their peers. By fostering awareness and providing resources, we're equipping these middle schoolers with the knowledge to recognize and respond to potential threats, creating a safer community for everyone," said Michelle Heater, Program Director, Victim Assistance Programs, Waymakers.

According to the students in attendance, a highlight of the day was the testimony from Martha Trujillo, who experienced trafficking as a young teen. Many attendees lined up to speak with her following her remarks to learn more about her personal story: "Imagine carrying that kind of weight at 15 – the shame, the fear, the feeling that you'll never be whole again. I was just a kid, trying to survive in a world that felt like it was designed to break me. And the hardest part? I didn't realize I was being trafficked. I thought I was making

my own decisions, but the truth is, I was trapped by invisible chains of manipulation and control. Looking back, I see how much I needed someone to tell me, 'This isn't your fault. You are worth so much more,'" said, Martha Trujillo, Survivor Advocate and Mentor, Full Circle Orange County.

Through motivational speakers, survivors' personal accounts, interactive activities and critical discussions, the students learned how to identify healthy relationships with peers and adults. Key takeaways included:

- Understanding the definition of human trafficking, including sex and labor trafficking, and its prevalence in Orange County
  - Learning how vulnerable individuals are manipulated into sexual exploitation—especially young people in diverse communities, where access to resources about the harms of human trafficking are limited
- Understanding how to respond to human trafficking through with the tools and resources that are available to keep youth safe and how to seek help.

"The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force and its community partners are a united front focused on prevention—where safety, education, and awareness are the foundation for dismantling the business of sex and human traffickers. Together, we are creating safe spaces and reliable support networks where children can thrive without fear," said Anaheim Police Chief Rick P. Armendariz.

Teachers and counselors who attended with their students witnessed the impact of this issue on the vulnerable middle school-aged population. Youth rely very heavily on online interactions for their sense of community and connection. Educators are on the front lines with our youth and are encouraged to ensure that this knowledge on how to stay safe in interpersonal interactions, both online and in person, will continue to grow and spread throughout their schools.

"The 'Know More, Do Better' event geared toward students would not be possible without so many partners coming together, including the CSEC Steering Committee led by the County of Orange Social Services Agency. The addition of an event focused on actions parents can take is another vital step in the work. Collective action like this is needed to protect our children, not just from sexual exploitation, but also from all forms of abuse and neglect." said An Tran, Director, Social Services Agency.

### **New This Year**

Relying on private funding, donations and volunteer support, this conference brings together nonprofits who are dedicated to the issue of **human trafficking prevention—an area that receives little to no funding**. This year's event is sponsored in large part by Higher Ground, which contributed \$10,000 to ensure the program continues. The funds help support the costs of planning, lunch and interactive activities to help make a heavy topic educational and entertaining for the students. K[her]ut, a local social enterprise providing job skills training and employment to survivors of sex trafficking, provided the students' lunch. This event hoped to inspire courage for the students by seeing victims come full circle as survivors and make sure the next generation is safer and better protected.

### **Know More, Do Better For Parents**

Following today's youth program, the OCHTTF and Vanguard University's Global Center for Women and Justice are partnering to facilitate **Know More, Do Better: For Parents and Caregivers, on Thursday, February 6, 2025**. The accompanying workshop is open to all parents for public attendance, not just

parents from the schools invited to the student event. Offered both in-person and online, the workshop will be provided in both English and Spanish. Registration can be completed online in [English here](#) and [Spanish here](#).

Know More, Do Better 3.0 is made possible through the following partnerships:

- Event Planning Committee: Anaheim Union High School District, Crittenton Services for Children and Families, Eastside Christian Church, Global Center for Women and Justice at Vanguard University, Higher Ground Youth and Family Services, Live2Free, Mary's Path, Orangewood Foundation, Orange County Social Services Agency, Orange County Department of Education, Soroptimists Together Against Trafficking II, and Waymakers.
- Community Resources & Youth Activities: Anaheim Police Department, Casa Youth Shelter, Children's Hospital of Orange County, CSEC Steering Committee, Crittenton Services for Children and Families, Forgotten Children, Inc., Global Center for Women and Justice, Global Hope 365, Higher Ground Youth and Family Services, i-5 Freedom Network, K[her]ut, Laura's House, Live2Free, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Olive Crest, Orange County Department of Education, Orange County District Attorney's Office, Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, , Orange County Probation Department, Orange County Social Services Agency, Orange County Superior Court, Orangewood Foundation, Public Law Center, Radiant Futures, Soroptimists Together Against Trafficking II, The Salvation Army, U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Homeland Security Investigations, and Waymakers.
- Event Sponsors: Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Cal-Pac JCEMT- Abolition Task Force, Collaborative to End Human Trafficking, Eastside Christian Church, Higher Ground Youth and Family Services, JJC Family, and Mary's Path

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#### **ABOUT WAYMAKERS**

Waymakers is a lifeline for countless individuals throughout Orange County who are seeking hope and healing after experiencing trauma. The staff and volunteers focus on creating an environment where individuals can make choices that lead to strength and stability. Waymakers has been sheltering children, supporting victims, counseling families, resolving conflicts and educating communities since 1972. Learn more at [Waymakersoc.org](http://Waymakersoc.org).

#### **ABOUT ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE (OCHTTF)**

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is a multidisciplinary anti human-trafficking effort of over 70 professional fields and agencies including law enforcement, victim service providers, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies, and the community. Waymakers is the lead Victim Service Provider and Anaheim Police Department is the lead law enforcement agency. Learn more at <https://www.ochumantrafficking.com>.

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