



MEDIA RELEASE / ANNOUNCEMENT

The Spot the Signs Forum

A Human Trafficking Awareness Event for Northeast Florida

Green Cove Springs – January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. Key experts who lead local, regional, state and even national efforts to address this often life-ruining activity gathered in Green Cove Springs Friday to share information about “spotting the signs” of human trafficking in communities. They also shared insight into what action to take when this occurs.

Key announcements were made by Clay County Clerk of Court and Comptroller Tara S. Green along with Clay County Sheriff Michelle Cook. They challenged the seventy-five forum attendees to take part in the Florida Attorney General’s 100% Club training, a free 1-hour training video opening eyes to the realities of human trafficking. The reality is that it can happen to anyone, anywhere – including in Clay County. There were ten known cases here just last year.

“If you had asked me just two years ago if Clay County even had human trafficking, I would struggle with the answer, mainly due to lack of awareness,” Green said. “But the reality is – we did then, and we do now.” She added, “People hurting the vulnerable around them and using others for monetary gain is a crime as old as time – a problem older than this Historic Courthouse where we’re holding this meeting today.”

An announcement made by Sheriff Cook followed regarding upcoming law enforcement initiatives related to Human Trafficking activities in our area. Joined by law enforcement leaders from Duval County and Orange Park Police Department, Sheriff Cook revealed a joint effort already underway that involves holding human traffickers accountable for their crimes in our region. Details are being kept close to the vest for obvious reasons, but Sheriff Cook revealed the involvement of Homeland Security Investigations officials with focus on cases involving children.

“This unified front sends a message that real action will be taken in defense of human trafficking victims and against those who commit this crime,” the Sheriff said.

The forum's opening speaker, Vicky Basra of the Delores Barr Weaver Foundation, shared true stories of survivors she has personally assisted.

"The average age of those targeted is fourteen, and they are usually females, but not always," she said. "They come to us with very little self-worth and riddled with health problems." Basra added, "Often, the trafficker is the only "family" the victim has, or, they are able to convince the juvenile that their family doesn't care about or understand them – it's the grooming phase."

All Clay County Clerk of Court and Comptroller's Office personnel (about 100 people) completed the Attorney General's (AG) 100% Club training in late 2022. Green's office received notice of its 100% Club Certification from the AG in time for the forum, which prompted Green to challenge others to take part also. In combination with the training, organizations must also adopt a clear policy regarding human trafficking awareness and how their employees should respond if they "spot the signs". The response includes 1) taking note of as much information as possible, 2) consulting with a supervisor, and 3) reporting to law enforcement.

The state's hotline numbers to report human trafficking activity is **1-888-373-7888 or use 1-800-342-0820.**

Since 2007, when the hotline was established, 15,053 victims of human trafficking have been identified in our state and assistance offered. Anyone who suspects they've seen human trafficking activity can also contact their local law enforcement office directly.

The forum audience, both in person and online, represented a wide array of backgrounds and knowledge levels – some new to the topic and others already very much involved in the fight. Attendees included local government, not-for-profits, faith-based groups, social service organizations, law enforcement, justice system, corporate groups, education, and civic groups.

"There is much more we can learn from each other and more work to be done for survivors, especially in growing counties like ours," Green said, adding, "Together, let's learn to spot the signs.

****Please see attached file for the list of signs related to victims of human trafficking. ****

Media Contacts: PIO Mary Justino (Clerk's Office) or PIO Andrew Ford (CCSO); Thank you.

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