

Human trafficking, and specifically sex trafficking, has been receiving increased attention in our society. Shining a light on this troubling issue is a good thing and focused efforts have brought services to victims throughout the state that help them move on to a life free of sex trafficking. One of the unfortunate side effects of this increased attention has been the misguided notion of how victims end up in sex trafficking. It is difficult to spend more than a day or two on social media without running across a post someone has shared warning of the latest method “sex traffickers” are using to abduct their victims. Almost without fail, these warnings give the impression that sex traffickers are lying in wait, watching unsuspecting people filter by as they devise the next trick that will leave their random victim vulnerable to kidnapping. I’m not going to say this has never happened, however this is probably the least likely way any sex trafficking victim has ever been ensnared in this life. All of us should maintain our situational awareness. If you see something suspicious or find some kind of unusual circumstance happening around you, you should evaluate the situation with an eye towards what kind of vulnerability the situation has created for you and act to remove that vulnerability. The danger in focusing on the admittedly horrifying but virtually non-existent circumstance of a stranger abduction is that we miss out on the actual indicators of a person caught in the world of sex trafficking, because what we see in reality does not match our social media based fears. In the real world of sex trafficking, we see the chronic run away being exploited for a safe couch to sleep on. The young boy looking for affection after being cast aside once he came out to his friends and family. We see a mother trying to afford rent and being taken advantage of by her landlord. Youth who are coping with divorce, family incarceration, or abuse that turn to substances provided to them by someone willing to exploit that child. What we see are relationships that consist of one person feeding off of another’s vulnerabilities in order for them to make a profit. Visitors to [www.TheLifeStory.org](http://www.TheLifeStory.org) can listen to victims tell of the compelling real world circumstances that brought them into the sex trafficking world.

The goal of the modern sex trafficker is to find desperate and vulnerable men, women, boys, and girls, break them down using those vulnerabilities, and re-program them into believing they are nothing more than the property of their trafficker. Sex traffickers groom victims over time to remove their resistance and convince the victim that they are entirely dependent upon the trafficker. To combat sex trafficking, we need to be watchful for these traffickers in action and for victims displaying symptoms of this dependence. Kate LePage works for Lutheran Social Services as the Central MN Regional Navigator in the Safe Harbor program. In that capacity, LePage is responsible for connecting sex trafficking victims with the help and services they need to break free from sex trafficking. LePage, when asked about how victims enter sex trafficking, said *“I can say that in over two years of working specifically with Safe Harbor, I have never encountered a victim that was kidnapped. It does happen, just as we periodically see sexual assault taking place between strangers, however the majority of commercial sexual exploitation is conducted through some form of relationship. This could be romantic, peer, familial, employer, landlord, and other things of that nature. The best way for (the) community to keep themselves safe is to be aware of unhealthy relationships in person but also online, know what trafficking and commercial exploitation mean and look like, and to know of local resources to help combat vulnerabilities.”* LePage suggested people be watchful for victim grooming behaviors such as *“(t)hings like gifts, anxious or abnormal behavior to include online activity, isolation from a normal peer*

*group, changes in mood or sleep patterns, and so forth.”* According to Safe Harbor, the following can also be signs of exploitation:

- Lack of eye contact
- Clothing is new or not appropriate
- Anxious, hostile, withdrawn, submissive, sleep deprived
- Unexplained bruises, scars, burn marks, or homemade tattoos
- Significantly older “boyfriend” or “daddy”
- A “sister” or “cousin” who seems controlling
- Unclear or coached responses to basic questions (age, where they live, school, travel)
- Unsure of their location
- Loss of sense of time
- Inconsistent stories and explanation of relationships
- Unexplained amounts of cash
- Prepaid Visa cards
- Motel/hotel keys or have been living in a hotel
- Sex paraphernalia (condoms/lingerie)
- Multiple electronic devices
- Significant changes in behavior, mood, friends, or sleep patterns

Be alert for people who are in vulnerable situations and point them to resources that will make them less vulnerable. If you see grooming behavior or something that causes you to suspect a person may be a victim of sex trafficking, take note of identifying characteristics of the people or vehicles involved. Provide as much information as possible about the people or circumstances to law enforcement immediately. You could be the person who helps put a sex trafficker in jail or helps a victim get connected to the services and support they need to leave a trafficker. If you’d like to learn more about sex trafficking in Minnesota and how you can help victims, please contact Kate LePage at [Kate.lepage@lssmn.org](mailto:Kate.lepage@lssmn.org) or (218) 824-3770.

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff’s Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.