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JOINING FORCES

Sex trafficking is a bigger problem than most people believe. The Human Anti-Trafficking Response Team (HART) and Toronto's Women's College Research Institute are working together to advance research to help victims of these hidden crimes.

Presented by Tamara Bahry, founding director of HART

By Aaron Lam



ABOVE: WOMEN'S COLLEGE HOSPITAL (BACK ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT): KELLY GRIER-NADAL, FOUNDER OF HART; JENNIFER BERNARD, CFRE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, WOMEN'S COLLEGE HOSPITAL FOUNDATION; CAROL WILDGOOSE, BOARD MEMBER, HART; (FRONT ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT): TAMARA BAHRY, BOARD MEMBER, HART; DEBBIE MCGRATH, BOARD MEMBER, HART.

It can happen anywhere. Victims of sex trafficking can look like, or even be, someone you already know. They may blend in with the community, even as they are being recruited, harboured, held or transported for purposes of sexual exploitation. Because victims are difficult to identify at a glance, the billion-dollar global sex-trafficking industry is often hidden in plain sight.

The vast majority of these victims are women and girls, many of whom have experienced forms of social marginalization that increase their vulnerability. Sex traffickers often use isolation, humiliation and illicit substances to maintain their stronghold on victims. Abuse may have serious physical and psychosocial consequences for survivors, resulting in the need for specialized care. "As a crisis-intervention volunteer with Victim Services York Region, I was shocked to learn about the number of young women and girls being trafficked right here in Ontario," says Kelly Grier-Nadal, who founded HART (Human Anti-Trafficking Response Team). "I could not turn away. It was a critically urgent issue in dire need of awareness and action."

Although it is a growing concern in Canada, sex trafficking is under-researched and under-reported. The healthcare system is often unresponsive to the unique needs of survivors, and gaps in

research have resulted in little evidence to influence healthcare models and government policy to better support and counsel those who seek help. "The lack of appropriate supports and resources creates a major barrier that prevents women from leaving their trafficker," says Grier-Nadal.

Thanks to a \$1-million gift from HART, Toronto's Women's College Hospital is establishing a vital new initiative to address the gaps in care. "HART was committed to finding a partner with a proven track record of launching innovative initiatives that can be replicated, not only in Canada, but eventually in other parts of the world as well," says Grier-Nadal. "At Women's College Hospital, we found exactly the partner we were looking for."

The generous gift from HART supports pioneering research overseen by Drs. Janice Du Mont and Robin Mason, who are senior scientists at Women's College Research Institute and prominent specialists in gender-based violence. "Our research will help us learn how prepared the health, social-service, police and education sectors are to recognize and appropriately respond to survivors," explains Dr. Du Mont. "Where gaps exist, our plan is to develop resources to address them."

One-on-one interviews with physicians, nurses and social workers will provide invaluable data to determine steps forward. "The majority of sex-trafficked women in Ontario are not trafficked from other countries, but are Canadian-born," says Dr. Mason. "By focusing on the issues here and learning from survivors themselves, we hope to bring greater understanding to their needs and contribute to systems change." Results of the study will potentially inform the development of standardized curricula on sex trafficking for healthcare providers. "Together, we are helping to shine a light on the second-largest criminal enterprise in the world," says Grier-Nadal. "Our goal is to educate, create awareness and involve others in supporting the important work that is needed to address this horrific crime."

To learn more about Women's College Hospital's partnership with HART, and to donate directly to its anti-trafficking program, please visit wchf.ca or call 416-323-6323. If you suspect someone is being trafficked, please call the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline for assistance. The hotline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Call 1-833-900-1010 or contact your local police service.