

NEWS

# Montclair State seeks to become a resource for advocacy against human trafficking

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For girls who are lured into sex trafficking schemes and exploited, the physical and emotional abuse starts early — often around age 13 or 14.

“There’s a grooming process that happens,” said Adriana, a trafficking survivor who works with GEMS, a survivor-led nonprofit that supports girls and young women experiencing commercial sexual exploitation in New York City.

“They’re targeting people who are runaway homeless youth, people who are in need of love, affection, attention,” she said, speaking recently at Montclair State University. She did not want to use her last name because of privacy concerns. “They’re trying to get to know you. They want to know your darkest secrets. Once they have you, it’s hard to get girls out.”

But getting girls out — by helping them get resources — is exactly what the organization does. GEMS, which stands for Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, is on the front lines of human trafficking, offering court advocacy, transitional housing and a host of educational initiatives to victims and survivors.

GEMS and New York — along with neighboring New Jersey — sit at an international gateway to what many people don't realize is a human trafficking destination.

“It was seen as a foreign issue for so long,” Adriana said. “It’s happening in our backyard all the time.”

The hidden abuse — and solutions to it — are not exclusively a New York issue, either. Montclair State, nestled in the New Jersey suburbs, has launched an education, research and advocacy campaign to shine a light on one of modern history's darkest practices.

## **It happens here**

Human trafficking is believed to be the third-largest criminal activity in the world, according to the FBI.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2019 received reports of 120 human trafficking cases in New Jersey. A case is an individual situation but can involve multiple victims.

About 80 percent of cases in 2019 targeted female victims. Nearly 88 percent involved sex trafficking.

New Jersey in 2019 ranked 13th in the nation for cases reported by states, according to the hotline. More than 4,500 cases were reported nationwide.

But trafficking, experts say, is notoriously underreported. In 2018, Polaris, which serves victims and survivors and operates the hotline, worked on 10,949 cases involving 23,078 survivors.

“The biggest takeaway is that it’s a global problem, but it also hits here locally,” said Kenneth Sumner, associate provost for academic affairs at Montclair State University and a founding member of Montclair Interest Group Against Human Trafficking, known as MIGHT.

North Jersey has seen plenty of cases of sex trafficking. A Paterson family for nearly two years ran a sex trafficking operation targeting young, drug-addicted women, NorthJersey.com reported in August.

An investigation by NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey revealed that Bergen County’s Teterboro Airport was the hub for financier Jeffrey Epstein’s global sex trafficking ring.

But less often part of the conversation — and equally acute — is labor trafficking, which can happen in food production, hospitality services and child care, among other industries.

“Most people don’t know that this could be somebody who’s mowing your lawn, who’s cleaning your house, who’s picking the agriculture for your food,” said Faith Taylor, a MIGHT co-founder and Montclair State business professor who teaches corporate social responsibility.

“It can be young kids who are runaways, who are in a broken home,” she added.

“They might be in your schools, but you just don’t know it.”

Taylor, who has helped major corporations build plans to address human trafficking, said rooting out trafficking in supply chains is one of the biggest steps toward addressing it at the corporate level.

The Department of Labor every two years releases a report that shows what countries and products are most likely to be affiliated with trafficked workers. Using the report, companies can ask questions: Where are our products coming from? What’s the source? Does the source have any violations?

“The products range from bricks that you buy to artificial flowers that you buy to gold jewelry to shrimp,” Taylor said.

In legislation, Taylor said, there’s hope: Companies registered in the United Kingdom must comply with the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 by tracking supplier violations, developing an escalation process for dealing with violators, offering training programs and ground-level management, and giving reports to senior leaders. There are similar laws in Australia and California, Taylor said.

“There are a lot more organizations acknowledging it,” said Adriana, of GEMS. “A lot of organizations all of a sudden have a trafficking task force.”

But at Montclair State, questions remained: How can all resources — front-line support, corporate planning, legislation, education and law enforcement — work together?

## Local advocacy

The idea for a human trafficking task force started when Mimi Feliciano, a philanthropist and member of the university's business school advisory board, approached Montclair State President Susan Cole about getting involved.

“I became more and more convinced that this would be an appropriate area of engagement by the university,” said Cole, who called trafficking “a vile and brutal business that touches all our lives.”

An interdisciplinary group hopes to use the institution’s research prowess to support people confronting trafficking while educating its students and raising community awareness.

MIGHT, Feliciano’s brainchild, began about a year ago with seven or eight people. Now it has more than 30 representatives from every corner of campus.

For MIGHT, January’s Human Trafficking Awareness month culminated in a campaign called “Out of the Shadows.” For two weeks, anyone walking through campus saw blue cardboard silhouettes in and around buildings. The silhouettes displayed victims’ stories and a QR code passersby could scan to learn more.

A group of student volunteers moved the silhouettes from location to location and then gathered last week in the university’s media studies building in the middle of campus. MIGHT also partnered with GEMS to screen the survivor organization’s film “Very Young Girls,” a raw exposé that follows young teens as they’re lured and exploited on the streets of New York.

MIGHT leaders said they want to capitalize on what universities do best: educate. So they developed a trafficking awareness curriculum and distributed it to 2,000 faculty members on campus. The university intends to share that resource, Feliciano said.

“There’s a lot now going on with legislation, a lot of NGOs doing victim services,” Feliciano said. “But nobody is telling the average kid, child even, what’s coming. They’re getting blindsided. They’re getting sucked into this world.”

MIGHT members also encouraged faculty to bring classes to the “Out of the Shadows” exhibit. Arnaud Kurze, who teaches transitional justice and human rights, asked his

students to visit the exhibit and reflect on it — then share it with their peers.

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Collaborations with nonprofit organizations, such as GEMS, and government agencies will allow Montclair State to “use research power to help them to better develop their interventions,” Sumner said.

That outreach has already included bringing law enforcement officials to campus for discussions about identifying people who are being trafficked — and how to take a victim-centered approach.

Law enforcement officers are trained to combat crime but are not always well-equipped to deal with trafficking victims, Kurze said.

Montclair State programs will help law enforcement “better understand the needs of victims so that stigma and revictimization don’t occur,” he added. “The last thing a victim needs is to be revictimized because they feel like they’re not understood by the system and the system is working against them.”

*The National Human Trafficking Hotline is 888-373-7888.*

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