

# PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

## Protecting America's Children From Human Trafficking

(NAPSA)—Every year, many of America's children become victims of human trafficking, a rapidly growing criminal industry. The best way to protect children, experts say, is to make sure they have happy lives and safe homes.

Take the case of "Ashleigh," a 15-year-old girl who was living on the streets after a childhood of neglect, sexual abuse, abandonment and unsuccessful foster care placements.

Forced into prostitution, Ashleigh was trafficked from city to city against her will along with several other girls as young as 12. Constant beatings by customers and her pimp caused Ashleigh to consider suicide to end her two years of slavery, torture, hopelessness and fear.

Finally, one night, when the pimp was passed out from crack cocaine, Ashleigh escaped to the safety of Covenant House, where she is now picking up the pieces of her life.

"Tragically, human trafficking is not an uncommon story in the U.S.," said Kevin Ryan, president of Covenant House, the nation's largest privately funded system of shelters for homeless and at-risk youth. "This criminal industry is expanding rapidly, trafficking more than 1 million of the world's children for labor or sexual exploitation. Twenty thousand are U.S. kids, homeless and runaways, who are vulnerable and gullible."

The shelters have been saving children and young adults from human trafficking, slavery and homelessness since the agency's founding in 1972. Across 22 sites in six countries, Covenant House provides support, a healing community and a host of legal and medical services to over 70,000 youths each year.



**One nonprofit organization offers a safe home for children who are vulnerable and at risk for becoming involved in human trafficking.**

"When problems arise, we must deal with them immediately so our young people do not fall prey to bad decisions like running away," said Ryan.

"Many of the homeless kids we help have been solicited on the streets or muscled into the sex trade," said Ryan. "This threat is worsening. Research predicts human trafficking will rise to the second-largest global criminal industry, surpassing black market arms sales and behind drug dealing."

If you suspect someone is a victim of human trafficking, call NINELINE (1-800-999-9999) to speak with a counselor who can help. A victim of human trafficking may exhibit the following traits:

- Seems controlled, isolated
- Avoids eye contact
- Bruises or battering
- Fear, depression, tension, submissiveness, nervousness
- Seems watched or followed
- No knowledge of what city he or she lives in
- Few personal possessions
- Limited communications
- Malnourishment, sleep deprivation.

For more information, visit [www.covenanthouse.org/action/human-trafficking](http://www.covenanthouse.org/action/human-trafficking).