

SMALL BUSINESS OWNER

Who You Are Matters: Combating Trafficking Every Day

Miguel owns a restaurant on Main Street in his town. One of his regular customers has asked him if he is aware of the issue of human trafficking and exploitation. Although Miguel had heard the term used before, he did not know much about the issue or if he had anything to offer such a complex issue. Miguel asked for more information and began to research what human trafficking looked like in his community.

At the next local business league meeting, he asks other small business owners if they are aware of the issue and what they are doing to combat it. He realizes that, collectively, they have a lot to learn about how to engage. They vote to reach out to the local anti-trafficking Task Force and NGOs to request information.

The local Task Force, service provider, and law enforcement come to share at their next meeting. The law enforcement representative shares what the issue looks like locally. The officer shares about recent sting operations involving hotels, restaurants, and transportation hubs. He also shares about the characteristics of the victims he has seen, stating that most do not identify as victims and are unaware of the extent of their exploitation or may be afraid to come forward to law enforcement.

The Task Force shared practical ways that the business community, particularly the food service industry, can engage. Miguel learns that traffickers often frequent restaurants looking for vulnerable people and utilize them as a meeting place to offer the false promise of a better life. Miguel learns the warning signs, what to look for, and how he can have his staff trained with response protocols.

Miguel also learns that he and the business community can make a commitment to offer fair wages and employment for all workers to avoid labor exploitation. Miguel plans to look for ways to become educated about his supply chain of food and goods. He will look at ways he can engage local farmers and food producers, as well as educate them about labor trafficking. He also makes plans to purchase uniforms for his employees that are made in the USA or with no slavery footprint.

The Task Force ended with sharing that there are many great efforts already in their community to combat trafficking. Miguel began to think of several ways he could assist those organizations – everything from offering a percentage of proceeds on a day to an organization, offering free advertising at the restaurant, donating food for a fundraiser an organization hosts, or offering culinary expertise to an event.

The service provider shared about their work with survivors and the services and programs they offer. They expressed that as survivors graduate from their program and are looking to successfully be reintegrated into society, that job prospects and opportunities are difficult. Businesses offering an internship, apprenticeship, or job position, are greatly needed.

At the end of the meeting, Miguel was excited and encouraged that there were practical ways that he could immediately begin to engage the issue with his small business.

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According to the US Small Business Administration (SBA), the 28 million small businesses in the United States occupy nearly 34 billion square feet of real estate. Further, small businesses provide 55% of the jobs in the US market. Small business owners bring creativity, innovation, and determination to their communities, which can be leveraged to make a difference in eradicating human trafficking.

As a professional, you can make a big difference with simple additions to what you are already doing every day! Consider the following:

- Learn the signs of sex and labor trafficking. Know what to look for to identify human trafficking of women, men, girls, and boys.
- Program the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888) into your mobile device, post free flyers with the contact information in your business locations, and include a link to www.humantraffickinghotline.org on your social media pages and website so that you and your customers can quickly report suspicious activity or get help.
- Ask local service providers (Human Trafficking Aftercare programs, Domestic Violence Shelters, Youth Shelters, Foster Care/Group Homes) what their tangible, financial, and service needs are, and determine if your store, employees, or customers could meet those needs.
- Build relationships with customers. Encourage adults to use their talents and skills to serve those vulnerable populations.
- Donate unused items to Aftercare residential homes and non-residential programs for survivors of human trafficking.
- Designate a percentage of profits from a sale, event, or Small Business Saturday to be donated to local service providers and organizations serving vulnerable youth.
- Allow customers to purchase gift cards to be donated to survivors, and then distribute them to local service providers.
- Research, to the best of your ability, the labor in your supply chain and make your purchases from trusted manufacturers.
- Engage other business owners in the conversation about what human trafficking looks like in your area and explore ways to partner together in your response.
- Consider offering apprentice programs to survivors or mentoring survivors in business and entrepreneurship.

When we engage together, miracles happen. Eradicating human trafficking will not be an easy task, but the steps to engaging the fight are simple. For more information about combating human trafficking and protecting vulnerable populations as a business, individual, or organization, visit www.engagetogether.com.