

# Mental health workers aid trafficking victims in Big Bend

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A south-side Tallahassee girl manipulated by her much older “boyfriend.” A Mexican immigrant girl. An American single mom with young kids. A group of male migrant farm workers.

Each looking for a better life. Each lured into a traumatic one.

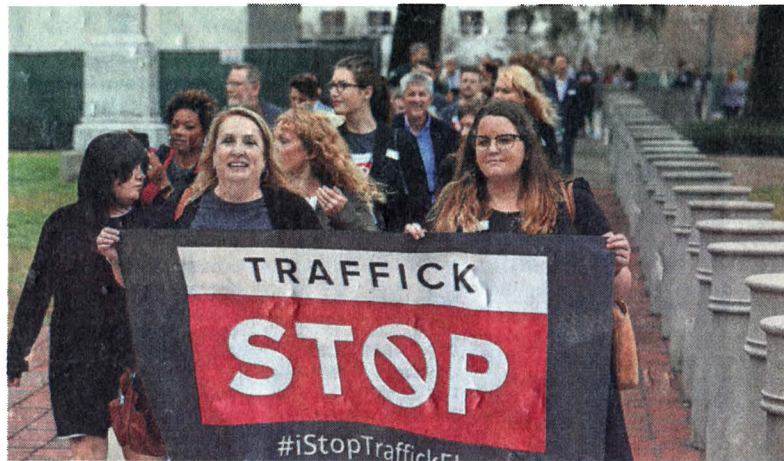
They were all victims of human trafficking in the Big Bend. Legally, that’s defined as using people by way of force,

fraud or coercion. it’s often referred to as “modern-day slavery.”

Social workers and therapists in the area have dedicated their time to hear their stories and help them lead new lives.

“It’s here in Tallahassee. It’s alive and well,” said Valerie Dallas, a local therapist who works with Florida State University’s Young Parents Project. “We have to erase the taboo so we can ... be there for these victims.”

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**A group of nearly a hundred people march from the Civic Center to the Historic Capitol in an effort to raise awareness against human trafficking Jan. 11.** JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT

*If you or someone you know is in danger, call the National Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-3737-888 or text "HELP" to 233733.*

# Trafficking

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Florida State University's Center for Prevention and Intervention Policy runs the Young Parents Project, a program that helps young mothers in the juvenile court system navigate parenting, overcome trauma and empower them to fulfill their goals.

Often, these young women come from a lifetime of poverty, Dallas said. Several of the girls in the YPP program are sex trafficking victims. Homeless and runaway youth are more vulnerable to traffickers, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

"Some of these pregnancies have resulted as a result of being trafficked," Dallas said.

And many of the girls were not even aware they were being trafficked.

Sometimes, it's an older boyfriend persuading the girl to participate in services for money, telling her "we need money for this," Dallas explained. Simultaneously, he may be fulfilling some of the basic needs she doesn't have at home, resulting in a sort of Stockholm Syndrome.

"When we brought up the term, 'You've been trafficked. This is a form of slavery,' it was just mind-blowing for her," said Dallas, remembering a time she had to gingerly explain to a YPP client. "Because all along, she thought this was how this particular relationship was to function."

Victim assistance coordinator Graciela Marquina works with the Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center, a Tallahassee-based nonprofit that collaborates with local agencies and law enforcement to get victims help, and assists in identifying victims.

"People see that it's in India and Africa — and it's here," said Marquina, a local social worker who has been working with victims for 15 years. "Even though people are shocked that it's here in Tallahassee."

Marquina helps law enforcement, health and faith-based agencies to identify victims. She is recruited to interview suspected victims, many of whom are often afraid of speaking to police because of traffickers' threats — especially if they've immigrated from countries where police are corrupt, Marquina explained.

"It's hard to escape," she said. "The victims know that the traffickers know, somewhere along the line, where their families live."

She helped care for the women in the 2008 U.S. v.



**Valerie Dallas, left, and Graciela Marquina, who work with local human trafficking victims, say people are shocked that it's here in Florida's Big Bend area.**

PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

## How to help

**Donate to STAC:** [surviveandthriveadvocacy.org/donatenow](http://surviveandthriveadvocacy.org/donatenow)

**Donate to the Young Parents' Program:** Mail a check addressed to FSU Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy — Young Parents Project 1339 E Lafayette St. Tallahassee, FL 32301

Monsalve case, in which Carlos Monsalve smuggled undocumented women for his prostitution ring that operated out of a Killburn house in Tallahassee, as well as out of Jacksonville and Tampa. He was sentenced to 20 years at a federal prison in Beaumont, Texas.

"Now the survivors have a life with dignity," Marquina said.

Aside from helping them get in touch with local services and jobs, Marquina also guides them to own their newfound lives — "their economic autonomy and see that they have a future."

"Once the victim understands that the person is free to make choices, my job is to ... let them choose what they want," she said. "That's part of being free."

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