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Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Launches New Training Program to Increase Human Trafficking Awareness

*Department partners with federal, state and
private agencies to prevent child human trafficking*

CHICAGO – January 11 is Human Trafficking Awareness Day, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is reminding the public that human trafficking is not something that only happens to people in other countries but occurs every day across Illinois to children whose average age is 14. To coincide with Human Trafficking Awareness Day, the department launched a new online human trafficking training for DCFS and private agency partner staff. The mandatory training encompasses key concepts and terminology; signs that a youth may be a victim of human trafficking or at risk of being trafficked; experiences of trafficked youth in foster care; and techniques child welfare professionals can use to support youth who have been trafficked.

“Illinois’ children are not immune to the reality of human trafficking, and it’s up to all of us to recognize the signs and call 911 and the DCFS hotline if you think a child may be in danger,” said Illinois DCFS Acting Director Marc D. Smith. “By working in coordination, DCFS and our partners provide a safety net to rescue child human trafficking victims and help them heal.”

In 2010, Illinois became one of the first states to pass comprehensive legislation to address the human trafficking of children under the age of 18. Under the Illinois Safe Children Act, children who are coerced into human trafficking/prostitution are innocent and immune from criminal prosecution and are diverted to the child welfare system with DCFS instead of the criminal justice system. Illinois DCFS established a strong partnership with federal, local and private agencies to prevent the human trafficking of children and support the children who have been trafficked and their families.

In Fiscal Year 2020, Illinois DCFS investigated 239 allegations of human trafficking of children – though experts believe the number of incidents that occurred during that time is higher. Often, victims of human trafficking do not seek help because they are fearful, ashamed of their situation, distrust law enforcement or become dependent on the perpetrator.

DCFS partners with the FBI, the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, the Cook County Sheriff’s Office, the Chicago Police Department and the Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center to help locate missing or

runaway youth who are at risk of falling victim to human trafficking and ensure appropriate services and housing are in place when a child victim is rescued.

When there is an allegation of child human trafficking, the child victim is referred to the local Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) where they are asked assessment questions only once by a trained professional in a safe environment. Medical and mental health professionals, law enforcement, prosecution and DCFS investigators observe, ensuring the child is not re-traumatized by recounting events multiple times.

The department partners with four agencies to provide support and services to youth who have been trafficked or are at risk of being trafficked. Chicago's ReClaim13 provides mentors and offers a congregate care setting for victims of sex trafficking between the ages of 10 and 17; Hoyleton's HALO (Healing and Loving Oneself) program provides services and support to youth in southern Illinois who have been victims of sex trafficking or are at risk of becoming victims; Selah Freedom provides prevention services to youth in care across the state and the Salvation Army's STOP-IT program provides advocacy and support services to referred youth.

KNOW THE SIGNS. A trafficked child might:

- Have an adult control them by speaking for them
- Seem out of place given the time of day or night
- Look disheveled or dressed in clothes that they could not afford to buy
- Show signs of physical abuse such as bruising or red marks
- Not possess any form of identification
- Perform inappropriate work for their age and not be compensated

Anyone who believes a child might be trafficked, or in danger of being trafficked, should immediately call 911 and the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE (800-252-2873).

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to calls received on the Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. When keeping a child safe means removing them from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible, DCFS is committed to pursuing adoption by loving families to provide children with a safe and permanent home. DCFS is also responsible for licensing and monitoring of all Illinois child welfare agencies.

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