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Contact

DCFS Communications: (312) 814-6847

Karen Hawkins karen.hawkins@illinois.gov

Federal, state, local agencies join forces to launch 'Our Children Are Not for Sale' Human Trafficking awareness campaign

***Posters, brochures aimed at alerting the public about how
to recognize and report trafficking***

CHICAGO – The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has joined forces with the FBI, the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and Cook County Sheriff's Office to launch a powerful media campaign aimed at raising public awareness about the human trafficking of youth.

The awareness campaign, "Our Children Are Not for Sale," asks the public to alert law enforcement and DCFS when they believe a child is a victim of human trafficking. An educational brochure defines trafficking, how to identify potential victims and perpetrators, and what to do to seek help.

"We all have a role to play in stopping the buying and selling of our children," said DCFS Acting Director Bobbie Gregg. "If people suspect a child is a victim of human trafficking, they should call 911 and the DCFS Child Abuse & Neglect Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE."

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 prostitution are immune from criminal prosecution and are diverted to the child protection system with DCFS instead of the criminal justice system.

Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez was instrumental to passage of the legislation, and her office has led the charge in proactively addressing the issue by forming a specialized Human Trafficking Initiative.

“The Illinois Safe Children’s Act has provided police and prosecutors with the essential tools that we need to aggressively tackle this crime and help to protect our most vulnerable victims,” Alvarez said. “We are calling on the public for help in bringing potential victims to our attention so that we can connect them with services and work to ensure that the perpetrators of this outrageous crime are brought to justice.”

Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart launched the Cook County Sheriff’s Child Protection Response Unit in October 2012, and the unit has since recovered over 300 runaway juveniles, most of whom fled group homes. The 300th was rescued on April 2, 2014.

“When runaway juveniles consistently end up alone on the street without any parents who care enough to look for them, it’s only a matter of time before traffickers take advantage of their desperation,” said Sheriff Dart, for whom child welfare has been a career-long passion dating back to his time as a prosecutor and state legislator. “When the state takes guardianship over children, we must go to extensive lengths to protect them from lives of sexual exploitation and brutality. That starts with caring enough to look for them when they go missing.”

DCFS has established an allegation of Human Trafficking of a Child in child protection investigations. Law enforcement officers and mandated reporters of abuse and neglect are required to report to the DCFS Child Abuse Hotline whenever they have reason to suspect that a minor has been exploited by traffickers, and DCFS will investigate the allegation and may refer the family for protective, supportive and therapeutic services.