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Quebec woman rescued by Winnipeg Police in human trafficking case

"This happens to people from right across the country from all backgrounds and circumstances," an expert says.

By: Glen Dawkins
March 27, 2024

The rescue of an 18-year-old Quebec woman from a Winnipeg residence last week who was the victim of human trafficking highlights the prevalence of the crime across the country, according to the head of an organization that works to raise awareness of human trafficking and offers support to victims.

"It's one of those things that it's so important for people to understand what it is and how it happens," said Janet Campbell, President and CEO of the Winnipeg-based Joy Smith Foundation, Canada's leading authority on human trafficking prevention, intervention and support for survivors. "I think people do have preconceived ideas that this could happen to somebody else's family or somebody else's loved one.

"In reality, what we see is this happens to people from right across the country from all backgrounds and circumstances. So it is something that could happen to anybody and by being knowledgeable about what it is and how it happens we can all be empowered to prevent it from happening to others."

Last Thursday evening, Winnipeg Police attended a short-term vacation rental residence to check on the well-being of a woman after receiving information from the Sûreté du Québec that she may be a victim of human trafficking. Patrol officers located the 18-year-old female victim and a 24-year-old male suspect within a suite. Officers placed the suspect under arrest without incident, police said Tuesday.

"It's more prevalent than most people realize and I think this case really puts a spotlight on the fact that it can happen anywhere and our experience is that these cases unfold in communities right across our country," said Campbell. "It can be happening to anybody's loved one. It is something that we hope that people will take the time to get some information and become informed. I think everybody can play a role in participating to prevent this from happening to somebody else."

The Counter-Exploitation Unit assumed the investigation and learned the suspect had met the victim in a bar in Montreal in early January and manipulated her to believe they were involved in a romantic relationship.

During March, investigators learned the suspect transported the victim to four cities in Ontario, working westward and ending in Winnipeg. The victim could not leave hotel rooms or vacation rentals in each location as the suspect held her personal identification and cellular phone. On several occasions, the suspect is alleged to have physically assaulted the victim to prevent her from leaving, police said.

Investigators learned the suspect procured the victim to work for him as an escort selling sexual services. The suspect created and posted a social media advertisement of the victim offering sexual services. The suspect arranged meets between clients and the victim and collected money from the sexual services provided.

“That is a pattern that we do see in many, many of the cases that come through our office,” said Campbell. “Often individuals will have a new relationship and often times it’s a romantic relationship and these predators are extremely skilled at manipulating and controlling victims. The victims that we work with are all incredibly smart individuals but these predators are just very skilled at what they do.”

Last Thursday, the victim managed to contact a friend in Quebec who summoned police assistance. After receiving information from and at the request of the SQ, the Winnipeg Police Service entered into an investigation and located the victim and suspect.

A 24-year-old Calgary man has been charged with human trafficking, procuring a person to provide sexual services and gaining material benefit from those services, advertising sexual services, forcible confinement and assault. He was detained in custody.

The victim was provided short-term support while in the company of investigators, and with assistance from the SQ and community partners in Winnipeg, she was brought back to her home province to the care of family members.