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Community calls for action after Manitoba human trafficking charges

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By [Joanne Roberts](#)

After the RCMP announced two people in Manitoba have been charged with human trafficking, community leaders are calling for stronger protections for immigrant workers, saying too many are still facing conditions they call modern-day slavery.

“If you bring someone and that person has no rights, needs to work double shifts — 14, 15, 16 hours — and you pay them half of minimum wage? It’s just slavery,” said Alfonso Maury, owner of La Pampa Empanadas Gourmet in Winnipeg.

Maury, an immigrant from Argentina, said he was shocked to learn of an RCMP investigation where immigrants from India working at the Howard Johnson hotel in Portage La Prairie were forced to work extreme hours for pay at around half of Manitoba’s \$15.80 minimum wage. Investigators say the workers were allegedly brought to Canada through the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) program, which is meant to fill labour shortages with qualified foreign workers.

“I hope these two persons are really punished — jail, fines, whatever. And they should never again run a business in Canada,” Maury said.

RCMP said the investigation began in Feb. after two female victims came forward. Over the course of the five month investigation, two more victims were identified. Charges have been laid against two hotel owners, but none have yet been proven in court.

Labour and Immigration Minister Malaya Marcelino told CityNews in a statement:

“Employment Standards has four claims active against this employer. As these investigations are ongoing, we cannot provide details on the claims. Our government takes the safety, health, and rights of workers seriously. That’s why we brought back the Advisory Council on Workplace Safety and Health, that was cancelled under the previous PC government. We continue to staff up the department and improve protections to ensure all workers are paid properly and not charged illegal fees for working in Manitoba. All provincially regulated workers in Manitoba are covered under the Employment Standards Code, including temporary foreign workers.”

“If Employment Standards finds an employer in violation of the Worker Recruitment and Protection Act, they can have their business registration removed, freezing their ability of hiring temporary foreign workers in the future. Employment Standards can also order the employer to pay fees for code violations.”

Maury, who has employed LMIA workers in the past at his restaurants, said governments need to better monitor the treatment of temporary foreign workers.

“When this happens, it’s against every kind of development and honest action of a business owner,” he said.

The Manitoba government confirmed that Employment Standards has four active claims against the employer. Details are not being released while the investigation is ongoing.

Foreign workers in Canada have legal rights that include protection from threats, exploitation, and unsafe living conditions. Employers are prohibited from withholding wages, controlling personal communications, keeping personal identification documents, or housing workers in unsafe environments. RCMP investigators said in one victim’s case, their identification documents were being withheld.

Janet Campbell, president and CEO of the Joy Smith Foundation, said the crime of human trafficking is often hidden in plain sight.

“In Canada, the two most prevalent forms of trafficking is sex trafficking and forced labour,” she said.



Janet Campbell, president and CEO of the Joy Smith Foundation, says human trafficking is underreported largely due to fear. (Joanne Roberts, CityNews)

“It’s underreported because people are afraid to come forward,” she said. “When perpetrators are charged, it’s a big step toward community safety.”

She says education and oversight are both critical.

“Human trafficking is the modern-day slave trade. It can happen right in front of us, and we might not even recognize it,” Campbell said.

Wyndham Hotels, the parent company of Howard Johnson, said its properties are independently owned and operated.

“We cannot comment on active investigations,” said a Wyndham Hotels & Resorts spokesperson. “However, Wyndham condemns all forms of human trafficking. Our hotels are individually owned and operated, and all are required to obey the law and operate in a manner compliant with specific standards related to legal obligations, ethics and business conduct. Franchisees who do not comply with legal obligations are subject to default and termination from our system.”