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## **Portage hotel owners charged in labour trafficking case**

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Written by Maryssa McFadden

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Two hotel owners in Portage la Prairie have been charged following a months-long investigation into what officials are calling a serious case of labour trafficking, which involves forcing or coercing people to work under unfair or illegal conditions, often through deception or threats.

The investigation began back in February, when local RCMP officers were called to a disturbance at a hotel in town. While responding, officers spoke with some of the workers and learned that something more troubling might be taking place behind the scenes.

Two women came forward and shared concerns about how they were being treated at their jobs. Further investigation uncovered two additional victims.

According to the RCMP, the four individuals, all originally from India, were brought to Canada under false promises. They were told they'd have steady, legal jobs, fair pay, and affordable living through proper work permits.

Instead, they found themselves working 15-hour days for less than half of minimum wage. Some were threatened with deportation, and one person had their personal identification documents taken away.

The Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) documents, which would make their jobs legal in Canada, were also withheld. Though three of the victims eventually received their documents, one has still never received theirs.

On June 12th, the two hotel owners, Jai Inder Sandhu, 62, and Satbir Sandhu, 48, were arrested and face multiple charges, including four counts of human trafficking and one count of receiving a material benefit from trafficking. Jai Inder Sandhu is

also charged with withholding or destroying documents and two counts of uttering threats.

"These people came to Canada in good faith, expecting a better life," says Sergeant Cathy Farrell from the RCMP's Human Trafficking Unit. "Instead, they were overworked, underpaid, and made to feel afraid."

While this case resulted in charges, RCMP say labour trafficking remains difficult to detect and vastly underreported.

"There's still a lot of fear and hesitation around coming forward. It's one of the most underreported crimes we deal with," she adds.

The RCMP was joined at a news conference this afternoon (Thursday) by representatives from two community organizations who work closely with survivors of human trafficking: [Joy Smith Foundation](#) and [The Salvation Army Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking Response](#).

Janet Campbell, President of the Joy Smith Foundation, explains how difficult it can be for victims to come forward.

"They're often isolated, scared, and unsure who to trust, but we want people to know there is support, and there are people who will listen and help," Campbell explains.

Dianna Bussey, who leads justice services for The Salvation Army in Manitoba, adds that cases like this are becoming more common.

"We're seeing more people being exploited for labour, not just in hospitality, but also in industries like construction, agriculture, and food service," Bussey says. "No one should have to live in fear while just trying to make a living."

The workers in this case were living at the hotel where they worked. There, they were responsible for everything, from front desk duties to cleaning and working in the restaurant. In most cases, they were on the job every single day, with little to no time off.

The RCMP and support groups are urging anyone who suspects someone might be in a similar situation to speak up. Warning signs can include working long hours for

little pay, not having access to their identification, or seeming afraid to talk to others.

As Sgt. Farrell says, "If you see something that doesn't feel right, say something. You might be the reason someone gets help."

Echoing that statement, Campbell says, when it comes to tackling exploitation, there is power in public awareness.

"People are learning more about human trafficking in general, and that's important. It's through knowledge and understanding that people can spot it and speak up."

For help or information, contact the Joy Smith Foundation at 204-691-2455 or **info@joycesmithfoundation.com**. They offer free resources, education, and community workshops.

The Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline is available 24/7 at 1-833-900-1010 for confidential support, emergency assistance, and public tips.

The Salvation Army's Human Trafficking Response also offers support services. In Manitoba, call 204-949-2100. They can also be reached by email at **pra-msht@salvationarmy.ca**.

~With files from Tylor Baer