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'It's modern-day slavery'

Manitoba Trucking Association links up with police, Joy Smith Foundation to roll out anti-labour trafficking campaign

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By: Gabrielle Piché

Rural MUNICIPALITY of ROSSER — Extreme work conditions, unpaid wages and withheld documents are a reality for some in the trucking sector, industry leads say.

Now, billboards, posters, digital advertisements and a black SUV will dot Manitoba to draw awareness.

"If we can save even one person from being human trafficked, it's worthwhile," said Pauline Wiebe Peters, president of the Manitoba Trucking Association.



Ruth Bonneville / Free Press

Joy Smith Foundation president Janet Campbell (from left), Winnipeg Police Service Insp. Andrea Scott and RCMP Sgt. R.M. Janzen at Tuesday's launch of an initiative seeking to address the issue of labour trafficking in Manitoba's trucking industry. The message will be carried by billboards and other advertising and a 'Trafficking Report' vehicle at events across the province.

The association has partnered with Winnipeg Crime Stoppers and the Joy Smith Foundation, a non-profit educating Manitobans on human trafficking prevention, on a campaign to bolster reporting on labour trafficking.

The group announced their initiative in March. Tuesday — the third day of National Trucking Week — marked the campaign's launch at the weigh scales on Highway 7, north of Winnipeg, in the RM of Rosser.

"It frustrates me when I see how some participants in the trucking industry are taking advantage of newcomers," Wiebe Peters said.

Nearly 40 per cent of trucking companies to hire foreign workers through the Labour Market Impact Assessment program have shuttered, when looking at 2019 through 2023, the Joy Smith Foundation shared.

Hundreds of such workers' whereabouts are unknown. They're believed to be suffering, said Janet Campbell, president of the Joy Smith Foundation.

"It's modern-day slavery," she asserted.

She shared an example of a man who'd been promised steady work and good wages, but instead had his passport taken, received a portion of the pay he'd expected and feared retaliation if he spoke out.

It's one of "several files" to cross the foundation's desk, Campbell said. She's clocked an increase in trucking-related cases over the past three years.

Winnipeg Crime Stoppers hasn't received trucking industry-specific labour trafficking tips, according to board chair Rob MacKenzie.

"We understand that there's a lot of hesitation in people and individuals coming forward."

The campaign promotes reporting suspected labour trafficking to authorities like Winnipeg Crime Stoppers. A tagline — "Know the signs. Report the crime" — is on display.

All Winnipeg Crime Stoppers tips are anonymous. Tips that lead to arrests can elicit up to \$2,000 for the tipster.

The campaign's website (traffickingreport.ca) also highlights national Crime Stoppers. Entities in other provinces have contacted the Joy Smith Foundation to unveil a similar program in their region, Campbell said.

The Canadian Trucking Alliance and its provincial counterparts have sounded alarm bells on labour misclassification and tax evasion for years.

Through the "Driver Inc." model, trucking companies under-report their payrolls to government, avoiding employee-related taxes.

Last year, 13 of 77 trucking companies the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba audited had under-reported their payrolls. Some businesses under-reported by millions of dollars.

The Manitoba Trucking Association has previously said there's likely a link between Driver Inc. schemes and worker abuse.

"(Truckers are) the ones that are going to see this happening," Wiebe Peters said of labour trafficking. "They're the ones that are going to report this."

Campbell didn't provide exact numbers on the Manitoba campaign's reach.

Around 50 billboards, traditional and digital, will be used, she said.

The campaign doesn't have an apparent end date.

This week, a black Chevrolet Suburban with the words "Trafficking Report" emblazoned on the side will travel through the province. Operators will stop and talk to Manitobans about trafficking; it'll become social media content, MacKenzie said.

The SUV will be at truck driver appreciation barbecues the Manitoba Trucking Association is hosting this week, Campbell said.

The provincial government tabbed \$276,000 for the campaign. Money came through the criminal property forfeiture fund.

Campbell didn't divulge the campaign's total cost, but said community groups have supported it.