

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Human Trafficking Hotline Calls from Washington State Increased in 2019

*Regional campaign to stop labor and sex trafficking marks progress;
details how COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the potential for exploitation*

Seattle, Washington -- To mark National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month this January, local leaders announced that a [public awareness campaign](#) begun in January of 2019 by the Port of Seattle, King County, City of Seattle, Sound Transit, Alaska Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and others led to a rise in the number of survivors and concerned local residents reaching out to the National Human Trafficking Hotline from Washington state.

Washington rose to the eighth highest call volume to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2019, up from the 13th highest in 2018. That surge indicates more people are reaching out for help and resources, like medical care, financial assistance, and housing, or to report their suspicions about potential human trafficking issues.

The national hotline can be reached at 1-888-373-7888, via text 233-733, or by visiting WATraffickingHelp.org.

“Awareness is everything in stopping and preventing trafficking,” said Port of Seattle Commissioner Sam Cho. “This campaign reaches survivors to know where they can receive help and King County residents to be aware of human trafficking. We combined our communications efforts with employee training to empower aviation and maritime workers to understand what trafficking looks like and how to disrupt it. This is some of the most important work we do at the Port.”

Updates on the regional campaign

The ongoing campaign expanded the public, private, and nonprofit partners sharing information online and resource signs in public spaces throughout the region.

Port of Seattle

The Port of Seattle installed 310 signs in the restrooms and passenger loading bridges at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, as well as 20 signs at Port of Seattle parks and 10 signs at Fisherman’s Terminal. We are currently adding more signage in eight languages beyond English, including Spanish, Tagalog, Korean, Chinese, Somali, Russian, Ukrainian and Vietnamese.

The Port of Seattle also implemented a new [human trafficking awareness training](#) for its employees, developed in partnership with Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST). This training – the first proprietary anti-human trafficking training developed by a port authority – will ensure that Port staff, and others who work at Port facilities, have the knowledge and resources to recognize and respond to instances of human trafficking. 2,013 Port of Seattle employees completed the training in 2020 - that is 81% percent of our workforce.

The Port of Seattle also recently provided BEST with a nearly \$100,000 [grant](#) to serve human trafficking survivors and at-risk youth living in the near-airport communities of Burien, Des Moines, Federal Way, Normandy Park, SeaTac, and Tukwila. This project will further economic recovery in South King County by delivering employment readiness training, supporting employers in Port-related industries, and creating paid internships and job opportunities for human trafficking survivors and at-risk youth in Port-related industries. BEST is already working with some of airport dining and retail tenants to place survivors into employment with safe, living-wage jobs.

King County

King County is a critical partner in the regional work to combat human trafficking, including the King County Council, King County Sheriff and King County Prosecutor's Office. It was the King County Council in 2013 that first ignited this work after a successful campaign that dramatically increased the number of trafficking survivors who called for resources.

“King County is strongly committed to the ongoing partnership of local municipalities, non-profit, and for-profit leaders to support survivors of human trafficking,” said King County Executive Dow Constantine. “The increase in human trafficking cases handled by the National Human Trafficking Hotline during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights, now more than ever, the need to unite our services and collaborate across King County to protect every person and ensure that all in our community can thrive.”

“Human trafficking remains an urgent and often overlooked issue facing our region and our communities,” said King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles. “Much of my legislative career has been dedicated to combating human trafficking, and one of the most important elements of it has been increasing awareness of the issue as a whole. Learning how to recognize the signs and where to seek help is one of the most basic ways that we as individuals can contribute to the safety of our community. I’m pleased to have partners at the city, county, and regional level that are so committed to elevating this conversation and continuing the fight.”

Each January when we renew the ongoing awareness campaign during Human Trafficking Prevention Month, visitors to the King County Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) [Task Force website](#) show the value of the continued work. January 2020 spurred a 61 percent increase to 900 visitors over the previous month.

“Given the pandemic has only increased the risk factors leading to human trafficking, it is important to intensify our efforts to combat it. The Port of Seattle has been a great partner in the fight against human trafficking and it is gratifying to know that they are continuing their education campaign,” said Regina S. Cahan, King County Superior Court Judge and Chair of the King County CSEC Task Force.

Sound Transit

BEST is working with Sound Transit to revise their protocols for responding to a human trafficking situation, and BEST started training their law enforcement officers. Sound Transit is in a unique position to help human trafficking survivors. According to BEST, 33 percent of human trafficking survivors surveyed said that they used public busses during their exploitation and 19 percent used rail services. Additionally, 26 percent of survivors reported that public or mass transit played a role in at least one of their attempts to escape their traffickers.

Local Cities

Beyond the core partners listed above, the regional awareness campaign also involves private sector companies, local governments, and the Port's federal partners. Most recently, local cities are issuing proclamations for awareness and action.

The City of Burien adopted a [proclamation](#) on January 4, 2021 to raise awareness and work collaboratively with law enforcement agencies and community organizations to combat this human rights issue. City of SeaTac Mayor Erin Sitterley [declared](#) on January 13, 2021, that January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. The Kent City Council approved a [proclamation](#) declaring January 23 as Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Day. The Des Moines City Council is expected to join its neighbors by approving a [proclamation](#) at its January 21, 2021 meeting.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Human Trafficking

The economic ramifications of the pandemic shuttered businesses, furloughed and laid off employees, strained social services, heightened food and housing insecurity, and nurtured social isolation. All contributing factors due to the economic shutdown that exacerbate the potential for exploitation.

According to the anti-trafficking group Polaris, the number of human trafficking cases handled by National Human Trafficking Hotline show a [40 percent increase](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This illustrates that traffickers are not slowing down or stopping. They are busy recruiting and grooming while so many people are vulnerable.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is intensifying risk factors for vulnerable, marginalized populations. Right now, we have more families who are financially vulnerable and who are experiencing food insecurity and the threat of eviction, while at the same time, we have a youth population spending much of their time online. This is creating an environment that is easier for traffickers to find and groom new victims,” explains Dr. Mar Brettmann, Ph.D., CEO of BEST. “We are thrilled that regional leaders are heightening their work to assist victims of human trafficking through awareness campaigns, employee training, and by providing new employment opportunities for survivors who have become even more vulnerable because of the pandemic.”

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About the Port of Seattle

Founded in 1911 by a vote of the people as a special purpose government, the Port of Seattle's mission is to promote economic opportunities and quality of life in the region by advancing trade, travel, commerce, and job creation in an equitable, accountable, and environmentally responsible manner.

The Port owns and operates Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA), Fishermen's Terminal — home of the North Pacific fishing fleet — and public marinas. The Port also owns two cruise ship terminals, a grain terminal, real estate assets, and marine cargo terminals through its partnership in the Northwest Seaport Alliance.

Port operations help support nearly 200,000 jobs and \$7 billion in wages throughout the region. Over the next 16 years, the Port's Century Agenda seeks to create an additional 100,000 jobs through economic growth while becoming the nation's leading green and energy-efficient port. Learn more at the [Port's website](#).

About Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST)

Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST) is a Seattle-based nonprofit organization with the mission to align and equip leaders to use the power of business to prevent human trafficking. BEST is the first organization in the country dedicated entirely to working with employers to disrupt human trafficking. BEST has provided consultation and training to thousands of employers on how to prevent human trafficking. For more information about BEST visit www.bestalliance.org.