

## DAILY NEWS EDITORIAL

### Sex trafficking has to be confronted



By: **Neela Mukherjee Lockel**, President and CEO of EAC Network & **Geraldine Hart**, Associate Vice President of Public Safety and Community Engagement at Hofstra University, former Suffolk County Police Commissioner, and former senior supervising resident agent for the Long Island FBI office.

Every parent wants to believe their child is safe. But the harsh truth is that the sex trafficking of minors isn't just happening in faraway cities or hidden corners of the internet — it's happening right here in the suburbs and throughout the five boroughs. In our neighborhoods, our schools, our shopping centers, and along our main streets. This isn't alarmism; it's reality. And it demands our collective action.

We've seen this crisis from both sides — law enforcement and direct services. Law enforcement agencies have investigated and dismantled trafficking operations across Long Island. Our experiences with the FBI, the Suffolk County Police Department, and within EAC Network revealed a chilling truth: while drugs and guns can be sold only once, human beings can be sold again and again.

The creation of Suffolk County's first stand-alone Human Trafficking Unit marked a turning point — a shift toward treating those recovered not as criminals, but as victims in need of safety, support, and compassion. Together, EAC Network and law enforcement built a model program that connects survivors to trusted social workers and critical services — helping victims heal while bringing traffickers to justice.

It's time for all of us to join the fight by understanding what trafficking is and how to stay safe. Trafficking thrives in silence; awareness is our first line of defense.

At every training session we conduct across Long Island, participants are stunned to learn how prevalent trafficking is right here in our own communities. But it does happen here. And education — of our children, neighbors, students, patients, teachers, coaches, and co-workers — is how we build a powerful defense against traffickers who prey on the vulnerable.

Last year, EAC Network reached nearly 5,000 local students through workshops on trafficking, online safety, and healthy relationships — and trained hundreds of parents, teachers, and faith leaders to recognize the red flags.

Vulnerability can take many forms. From college students away from home for the first time or under financial pressure, to young people in unstable households or online without guidance — traffickers know how to exploit the cracks in our systems. This is not about strangers abducting children from dark alleys.

Most sex trafficking in the United States does not involve stranger abduction. More often, children are lured and groomed by someone they know — often through social media or gaming platforms, where traffickers can build trust over time and manipulate emotions with precision.

Some still assume trafficking is a “big-city problem.” The truth is far different — and far more dangerous. The same tactics used in urban centers are used everywhere: grooming online, approaching kids at malls or bus stops, and exploiting insecurities. Just as the opioid crisis proved that addiction doesn't stop at city limits, human trafficking networks don't either.

At EAC Network we provide trauma-informed care, mentoring, safety planning, bilingual support, transportation, and — most importantly — trusted adult relationships that help youth rebuild confidence and learn what healthy relationships look like.

In 2024, we received 118 referrals and served 191 local youth. Since 2014, our Safe Harbour program has supported more than 840 Suffolk youth — children who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks. Yet even these numbers tell only part of the story: trafficking is chronically underreported. Victims often fear coming forward or go unrecognized by adults who miss the warning signs.

We are also seeing alarming trends — more cases, more warning signs, and more children at risk. Traffickers are increasingly using social media, gaming platforms, encrypted messaging, AI and cryptocurrencies to recruit victims and evade detection. Combating these evolving tactics demands greater awareness, deeper collaboration, and stronger investment in prevention and education.

Protecting children from exploitation is a shared responsibility. Every parent, teacher, coach, elected official, and caring adult has a role to play — by learning the signs, having the difficult conversations, and supporting the organizations doing this work on the ground.

Sex trafficking of minors is one of the darkest challenges we face. But with open eyes, strong partnerships, and a shared resolve, it is one we can — and must — confront together.

These are our children. And it is our responsibility to protect them.

Mukherjee Lockel is the president and CEO of EAC Network. Hart is the associate vice president of public safety and community engagement at Hofstra University and a former Suffolk County police commissioner and former senior supervising resident agent for the Long Island FBI Office.