'I didn't know that there was help': Sex trafficking survivor speaks at Appleton gathering

Chris Mueller, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

(Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

APPLETON - Kimberly was only 12 years old when she became a victim of sex trafficking.

"I didn't know that there was help. I didn't know that there were people who cared," she told a crowd gathered Wednesday afternoon inside the Outagamie County administration building in downtown Appleton for a Hands Around the Courthouse event.

Kimberly, who is being identified only by her first name to protect her privacy, is originally from a small Wisconsin town of a few hundred people and was victimized by a female neighbor.

She is now 30 years old and described being scared for her life, but also too afraid to try to find help. She said the criminals in these situations don't stand out in a crowd.

"They could be your neighbor," she said. "And it's not only men."

More than 50 people gathered in the main lobby of the administration building Wednesday. They heard speakers, listened to a choir from Appleton West High School and held hands, spreading out across the lobby and up the stairs as they remembered the pain of those who have suffered at the hands of child abuse. It marked the fourth year of the Hands Around the Courthouse event.

Maria Turner, with the Citizen Review Panel serving Outagamie County, which hosted the event, said this year's gathering was meant to raise awareness of child abuse and neglect, with a focus on child sex trafficking. April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

If more people are aware of the issue, it's more likely they will intervene if they see something suspicious, Turner said.

"People are more aware, so they make a phone call," she said.

A survivor of child sex trafficking, Kimberly, who is only being identified by her first name, speaks during the Hands Around the Courthouse event at the Outagamie County administration building on Wednesday, April 4, 2018 in Appleton, Wis. Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin *(Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)*

The rate of reported cases of child abuse and neglect in Outagamie County has been above the statewide rate for years, according to the United Way Fox Cities LIFE Study, which measures demographic, economic, social and health issues in the Fox Cities.

Abby Persons, a social worker for Outagamie County who specializes in human trafficking, said Outagamie County took steps to address child sex trafficking before it was written into state law.

A total of 3,612 child protective services reports were received in Outagamie County last year.

Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson said child sex trafficking is an issue that is often hidden from public view.

"Too often, it's not talked about," he said. "That's a big reason why we dedicate an entire month to raise awareness."

Supporters and advocates hold hands on Wednesday afternoon in the main entrance to the Outagamie County administration building in Appleton during the Hands Around the Courthouse event. *(Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)*