

New PSAs on sex trafficking aimed at identifying signs of exploitation

Two videos about problem are released

Neeti Upadhye

Staff writer

Monroe County's Safe Harbour program, in partnership with the Center for Youth, has launched a community-awareness campaign about child sex trafficking in Monroe County.

"A lot of people probably think this isn't going on in Monroe County — but it is," said county Executive Maggie Brooks.

Two public-service announcement videos were released Wednesday as part of the campaign. The PSAs were produced to help people identify the signs of sexual exploitation in kids.

Brooks said victims of sexual abuse often tell family and friends first, so those people "need to know what to do with that information and how to connect with Safe Harbour resources," she said.

In 2012-13, Monroe County was selected as

one of five counties across the state to receive funds to identify and provide comprehensive services — such as safe housing and case management — to victims and potential victims of youth trafficking.

Since May 2013, the Safe Harbour program has identified 29 minors who have been involved in sex trafficking in Monroe County.

"That doesn't necessarily mean we have more victims," said Center for Youth Executive Director Elaine Spaul. "We are just better at identifying them."

When the Safe Harbour for Exploited Children Act was passed in the state Legislature in 2008, it ended the prosecution of minors charged with prostitution. Instead, the law identified youth charged with the crime as victims who were exploited by adults.

Valarie Douglas, director of runaway and homeless youth services at the Center for Youth, said she hopes victims will see the PSAs and seek out help.

"The young people need to know that they are not criminals," she said. "It's really flipping the script."

NUPADHYE@Gannett.com

[Twitter.com/NeetiU_DandC](https://twitter.com/NeetiU_DandC)

