

Oxford County deputies join human trafficking task force

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PARIS — Deputies at the Oxford County Sheriff's Office are joining the larger, statewide push to curb human trafficking through the creation of a new task force.

Last April, the state legislature passed LD 1730 to assist the victims of human trafficking with support groups and funding. Since passage, local law enforcement agencies have participated in a joint task force aimed at identifying, investigating and prosecuting human trafficking, according to sheriff's Chief Deputy Hart Daley.

As part of their involvement, deputies will be sent for training in Portland at the end of September to sharpen their skills in spotting trafficking red-flags, where they'll cover a gamut of scenarios, including visa abuse, immigration fraud and carrying firearms during a prisoner transport aboard aircraft, Daley said.

Human trafficking — from sex workers to the mistreatment of foreign, seasonal workers — has been a growing issue for the state, with law enforcement and prosecutors saying there is a lack of resources to help victims.

Though Oxford County isn't a hot spot per se and draws less attention than more populous regions, Daley said the training will augment deputies' know-how to uncover unreported incidents and respond to calls to assist neighboring communities.

He highlighted the problem of foreign students visiting on summer visas, who are manipulated into the sex trade or promised non-existent jobs. The work will not take precedent over deputies' duties in the county, and it is funded through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"We'll provide a support role around the state and work with other agencies to tap into their training and experiences. This is a tool for future investigations in Oxford County," Daley said.

While the new police task force trains officers to spot crime, civil groups across the state have resources for victims. They include: Polaris national hotline: 1-888-373-7888 or text BEFREE (23733); Sexual Assault Prevent & Response Services: 1-800-871-7741 or www.sapars.com; and The Maine Domestic Violence Statewide Helpline: 1-866-83-4HELP.