

Fight against 'modern-day slavery' of human trafficking in South Carolina makes strides

 [postandcourier.com/news/fight-against-modern-day-slavery-of-human-trafficking-in-south/article_7a04961a-47f4-11e8-bc3f-8f4c698be9f5.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/news/fight-against-modern-day-slavery-of-human-trafficking-in-south/article_7a04961a-47f4-11e8-bc3f-8f4c698be9f5.html)

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The man led a criminal ring that forced girls from South Carolina and other Southern states to have sex for money.

On his neck, Damon Jackson bore a tattoo: "Money Motivated."

Together with two main accomplices, Jackson held dozens of young women against their will, some of them minors. They used force and drugs to keep them awake until each had made him \$500 a night — beating them, raping them and giving them heroin and crack cocaine.

Nearly four years later, Jackson is awaiting sentencing after he was found guilty during a federal trial. Authorities heralded his August 2014 arrest as a major blow to sex trafficking in the Charleston area.



Damon Jackson. Cannon Detention Center/Provided

Experts say major strides have been made in South Carolina since the passage of a sweeping anti-human trafficking bill in 2012. But gaps still exist in resources, treatment available to victims and public comprehension of the problem.

For law enforcement, victims and the social workers who assist them, fighting predators such as Jackson requires an assault on multiple fronts.

'Modern-day slavery'

Elliott Daniels, a Columbia attorney who sits on the S.C. Human Trafficking Task Force, said a major shift in public understanding and perception of the problem is needed.

"We have victims that a culture looks at and says: You are runaways, you are throwaways, you are drug-addicted, or you are criminals," Daniels said. "But what is also true is they're victims of human trafficking. They are victims of modern-day slavery in South Carolina."

Through his work, the attorney said he has encountered victims ranging in age from 16 to 43 years old. They are honor roll students and people with intellectual disabilities. They are foreign nationals and native-born South Carolinians.

For 41-year-old Heather Cook, who was trafficked in South Carolina for 18 years during the 1990s and 2000s, it's important that everyone learns to look beyond their initial impression of a situation.

"People didn't know what to look for," Cook said of public awareness during the time she was trafficked. "It was right in front of them, and they couldn't see it. ... I just wish back then that I had somebody that would have known what is known today and would have been like, 'What do you need? What can I help you with? I know something is wrong.'"

Between 2003 and 2008, Cook said she was trafficked in the Charleston area. She was sold for sex in North Charleston motels, clubs in downtown Charleston, apartments in West Ashley and on the Isle of Palms.

At first, her trafficker preyed on her vulnerability. Cook was a chronic runaway, trying to escape a dysfunctional family life at home.

"I was scared, wounded and hurt from all that, but I was also confused by all of that," Cook said.

Her first pimp claimed he could solve all her problems. She was 14 years old.

"He was the person that made me believe that he could take all the bad things away from me and that he would be good for me," Cook said. "As the years went on ... and I was being prostituted, being exploited, it was 'nobody's ever going to want you. I'm the only one.' And so it became mental abuse. It became a place where I felt stuck."

She finally escaped the life when she was pulled over by a police officer in 2008 after not using her turn signal.

Cook knew the officer was her way out.

For years, she had avoided the law. Open charges for past probation violations and other crimes meant that when the officer pulled her over, she knew she would go to prison.

The two years she spent behind bars were enough for Cook to finally break the cycle she had been trapped in for so long.

Seeds of change

Since that time, experts say significant progress has been made in educating and equipping law enforcement and others who may come into contact with people vulnerable to being trafficked.

The 2012 human trafficking bill mandated the formation of the statewide human trafficking task force and sparked work on the issue in a way that had never happened before in the Palmetto State, Daniels said.

An essential culture shift in identifying and assisting victims is beginning to take hold, especially in law enforcement and the criminal justice system overall.

And resources are being developed to house victims, get them therapy, education and other services. And more rigorous enforcement of laws is leading to harsher penalties for people such as Jackson who enslave others into the commercial sex trade.

But in a state of more than 5 million residents, there is only one full-time home for trafficking victims: Doors to Freedom, which serves females ages 12 to 21 in the Lowcountry.

While two similar programs are set to open in the future — the Midlands-based Lighthouse for Life and Jasmine Road in the Upstate — there will still not be enough space to serve all South Carolina victims, experts say.

"We need programs," said Sharon Rikard, executive director of Doors to Freedom. "We don't just need beds. The greatest need in South Carolina is an acute shelter."

Rikard's nonprofit earlier this month became the state's first full-time home for underage trafficking victims. It had previously operated a daytime program that provided education and other services.

But Doors to Freedom's 10 beds can't accommodate all the victims.

"Our primary focus is minors," Rikard said. "We need a facility that will work with adults. You need the acute center plus places for younger and older girls."

For Rachael Garrett, director of community programs at the Dee Norton Child Advocacy Center, it's essential to set up a facility where victims can be housed safely while authorities conduct forensic interviews, do medical examinations and sort out what each victim needs to begin recovery.

Under the current system, victims often end up in county jails or in S.C. Department of Juvenile Justice facilities because there is nowhere else for them.

Law enforcement, social workers, prosecutors and others need to keep working together on solutions, Garrett said.

"The need is increased with this population because of safety concerns," Garrett said. "No one agency should or wants to work in a silo."

Signs of hope

Kathryn Moorehead, who coordinates the state's Human Trafficking Task Force, said work continues in critical areas such as data collection, professional training, establishing a rapid response team and developing a standard of care for victims.

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Kathryn Moorehead joined the S.C. Attorney General's Office in 2016 to coordinate the state's Human Trafficking Task Force. File/Staff

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In the next year, the task force hopes to continue engaging with family court judges and training health care providers at facilities ranging from large hospitals to urgent care clinics. It also wants to continue developing a data collection system that's critical in determining what kinds of services are needed, where they're needed and how best to deploy them, Moorehead said.

The task force is also preparing to host its [Youth Advocacy Summit](#) in Columbia on June 27, where members hope to empower high school students to speak to other youth about trafficking in an age-appropriate fashion.

Today, Cook is also helping to educate the public by speaking at events and sharing her story as a survivor. She lives in the Midlands, where she is married. Cook, a mother of five children, hopes that education can also extend to trafficking victims and youth who are at risk of being exploited like she was.

"Sometimes they don't know what it is to be coerced," she said. "They feel filthy. When you have just spent the past 24 hours sleeping with over 24 men, imagine that on a daily basis. Give them help so they can deal with the shame, the guilt, the anger."