

MISSING & ENDANGERED



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The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse Advisory Board (MEPICAB) was established in 1996 to address issues regarding Florida's missing children. It later expanded to include missing endangered adults and seniors. The MEPICAB's mission is to support awareness, education and training for the prevention, response and recovery of missing and endangered persons.

Board members represent a diverse group of law enforcement officials, government agencies, impacted families, non-profit organizations, private sector partners and community members interested in missing person issues. The MEPICAB works with the Florida Missing Children's Day Foundation (FMCDF) to present Florida Missing Children's Day, which will be held Monday, September 14, 2026. For more information regarding the MEPICAB, Florida Missing Children's Day or FMCDF, visit www.fmcdf.org.





What is HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Human trafficking is a crime involving the exploitation of a person for labor, services, or commercial sex. Men, women, and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of human trafficking. It occurs in all regions of the world.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as:

Sex trafficking - The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A)).

Forced labor - The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(B)).

ACT

Trafficker must do one of the following to people:

- Recruit
- Transport
- Transfer
- Harbor
- Receive

+

MEANS

Using one or more of these methods:

- Threat or use of force
- Coercion
- Fraud
- Deception
- Abuse of a position of vulnerability
- Giving payments or benefits
- Abduction

+

PURPOSE

Exploitation

=

TRAFFICKING

Resources:

- U.S. Department of Justice: <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking>
- United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>



Human Trafficking Myths

Myth: All human trafficking involves commercial sex.

→ **Reality:** Sex trafficking exists, but it isn't the only form of human trafficking. Forced labor is also a type of human trafficking, and, like sex trafficking, it involves the exploitation of people. Victims of forced labor are found in both legitimate and illegitimate labor industries. Examples include sweatshops, massage parlors, agriculture, restaurants, hotels, and domestic service.

Myth: Human trafficking always involves violent crime.

→ **Reality:** It is a commonly held belief that human trafficking always involves kidnapping or physically forcing someone into a situation. In reality, most human traffickers manipulate, defraud, or threaten victims into providing commercial sex or labor.

Myth: Human trafficking is uncommon in the United States.

→ **Reality:** Human trafficking occurs in every country in the world, including the U.S. Sex trafficking and forced labor have been reported in all fifty states. Traffickers in the U.S. are increasingly utilizing social media to recruit and exploit victims.

Myth: Only women and girls can be victims of human trafficking.

→ **Reality:** Anyone, regardless of age or gender, can become a victim of human trafficking.

Myth: Human trafficking only occurs in illegal or underground industries.

→ **Reality:** Human trafficking cases have been reported and prosecuted in industries including restaurants, cleaning services, construction sites, factories, and more.

Myth: Trafficking victims are physically unable to leave their situations/locked in/held against their will.

→ **Reality:** While this can be the case, it is more common for people in trafficking situations to stay for more complicated reasons. They may lack the basic necessities needed to physically get out (e.g., transportation, a safe place to live) or they may be afraid for their safety. Sometimes, victims have been so effectively manipulated that they do not identify themselves as being under the control of another person.

Resources:

- Polaris Project: <https://polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/>



RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS *of Human Trafficking*

Labor Trafficking

Signs someone may be experiencing labor trafficking:

- Feel pressured by their employer to stay in a job or situation they want to leave
- Owe money to an employer or recruiter and/or are not being paid what they were promised or owed
- Do not have control of their passport or other identity documents
- Are living and working in isolated conditions, largely cut off from interaction with others or support systems
- Appear to be monitored by another person when talking or interacting with others
- Are living in dangerous, overcrowded, or inhumane conditions provided by an employer
- Are being threatened by their boss with deportation or harm
- Are working in dangerous conditions without proper safety gear, training, adequate breaks, and other protections

Sex Trafficking

Signs someone may be experiencing sex trafficking:

- Want to stop participating in commercial sex but feel scared or unable to leave the situation
- Disclose that they were reluctant to engage in commercial sex but that someone pressured them into it
- Live where they work or are transported by guards between home and workplace
- Are children who live with or are dependent on a family member with a substance use problem or who is abusive
- Have a “pimp” or “manager” in the commercial sex industry
- Work in an industry where it may be common to be pressured into performing sex acts for money, such as a strip club, illicit cantina, go-go bar, or illicit massage business
- Have a controlling parent, guardian, romantic partner, or “sponsor” who will not allow them to meet or speak with anyone alone or who monitors their movements, spending, or communications

Report

National Human Trafficking Hotline:
1-888-373-7888

Florida Human Trafficking Hotline:
1-855-FLA-SAFE (352-7233)

Information to Gather:

Location, physical descriptions of people involved, vehicle details, specific behaviors observed (do not approach suspected traffickers directly)

Resources:

- National Human Trafficking Hotline: <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/human-trafficking/recognizing-signs>





Florida's Front Line: How FDLE is Targeting Human Trafficking Through Missing Persons Recovery

By Melissa Bujeda, Director of Missing Persons and Offender Enforcement
with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)



When a child goes missing in Florida, one agency sits at the center of the response: the Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse, known as MEPIC. Established in 1983 as the first state-level clearinghouse of its kind in the nation, MEPIC has long served as the connection between law enforcement, citizens, and the private organizations working to bring Florida's missing home. But in late 2025, MEPIC's role took on new urgency and new scale as the agency became a key intelligence and operational partner in human trafficking investigations tied directly to missing children's cases.

The Missing-Trafficking Nexus

For years, investigators have understood that a significant number of missing children are not simply lost or runaways; they are victims of exploitation. Florida, with its geography, major tourism corridors, and large transient population, has historically been identified as a high-activity state for human trafficking. MEPIC's analytical infrastructure, which includes a central repository of missing person data and the authority to issue AMBER Alerts, Missing Child Alerts, Purple Alerts, and Silver Alerts statewide, positions the clearinghouse uniquely to identify when a missing person's case may have a trafficking dimension.

That intersection was on full display in 2025, as MEPIC worked alongside federal and local law enforcement to execute a series of operations producing historic results and confronted the realities of what happens to vulnerable children who fall through the cracks.

Operation Dragon Eye: A Historic First

MEPIC analysts and FDLE agents participated in a joint operation coordinated by the U.S. Marshals Service targeting critically missing children across Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties in the Tampa Bay region. Over two weeks, the multidisciplinary task force, which included federal, state, and local law enforcement alongside social service providers, medical professionals, and nonprofit organizations, located or recovered 60 children between the ages of 9 and 17.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement called it "the most successful missing child recovery operation in American history" at the time of its conclusion, and the results bore that out. Eight arrests were made during the operation, including at least one individual charged with human trafficking. The accused trafficker, a 42-year-old man, had been exploiting a 17-year-old female, a case that came to light precisely because the girl had been reported as a missing child and flagged through the clearinghouse system.

The unique part of this operation was the fact that underage critically missing children, ranging from age 9 to 17, were not only recovered but also provided with physical and psychological care. Follow-up assistance was built into the mission structure, specifically to prevent recovered youth from cycling back into dangerous situations.

Multiple nonprofit organizations were embedded in the operation to provide trauma-informed support from the moment of recovery. This integrated model, pairing law enforcement action with immediate wraparound services, set the template for what would come later in the year.

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Florida's Front Line: How FDLE is Targeting Human Trafficking Through Missing Persons Recovery, *CONTINUED*

Operation Home for the Holidays: Breaking Records Again

Building on the success of Dragon Eye, FDLE and MEPIC partnered with the U.S. Marshals Service for a second, even larger operation in November 2025. "Operation Home for the Holidays" concluded a two-week statewide sweep that recovered 122 missing or endangered children, surpassing Dragon Eye and earning recognition as one of the largest child recovery operations in American history.

The operation's geographic reach was dramatically expanded. Children were recovered across four Florida regions: 57 in Tampa Bay, 29 in Fort Myers, 22 in Jacksonville, and 14 in Orlando. The task force also extended into nine other states, reflecting the interstate nature of trafficking networks that exploit missing children. Two children were recovered internationally.

The coalition assembled for the operation was equally expansive, including the FBI, FDLE, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations, eleven county sheriff's offices, the Florida Department of Children and Families, child protection teams, and an array of community advocacy groups.

The children recovered represented a range of vulnerability. Many have experienced abuse, neglect, exploitation, or direct exposure to criminal activity. Among those found: a young pregnant girl who received prenatal care for the first time after her recovery, two brothers requiring initial care for substance dependency, and a toddler who had been in Mexico. The range of circumstances illustrates how widely trafficking and exploitation networks can cast their nets and how essential early identification through missing persons systems remains.

Six felony arrests were made and other investigations continued.

FDLE Deputy Commissioner Vaden Pollard credited the intelligence-gathering infrastructure at the heart of the mission's success: "By gathering critical intelligence, pursuing every lead, and working together with our federal, state, and local partners, we achieved a unified mission and delivered meaningful results."

Operation LOCATE: Finding the Forgotten Children

While Dragon Eye and Home for the Holidays focused on recovering children already reported missing and flagged in law enforcement databases, Operation LOCATE revealed a different and, in some ways, more disturbing dimension of the trafficking threat: children who were never being watched at all.

Operation LOCATE was a joint operation between FDLE and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ICE/ERO) aimed at locating and checking the welfare of unaccompanied minors who had entered the United States, been placed with sponsors in Florida, and had not been checked on in nearly five years.

FDLE's Missing Persons and Offender Enforcement division, working alongside FDLE's Regional Operations Centers and Division of Statewide Intelligence, conducted extensive analytical work to identify both the children and their sponsors, in many cases tracking three or four different addresses per child simply to verify the location and welfare of the child. The scope of that investigative effort underscores a critical and often overlooked reality: a missing child is not always one who has been reported.

Of the 408 total children located or confirmed relocated to another state or country during Operation LOCATE, 295 were physically found in person. Of those located, 20 were turned over to ERO or located in Department of Children and Families custody, indicating they were not living with their designated sponsors when found. To highlight just one of the cases, one child had been subjected to human labor trafficking.

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Florida's Front Line: How FDLE is Targeting Human Trafficking Through Missing Persons Recovery, *CONTINUED*

The Numbers

Taken together, Operations Dragon Eye, Home for the Holidays, and Locate represent three distinct but complementary approaches to the missing-trafficking problem: recovery of children already flagged in law enforcement systems, statewide multi-agency sweeps targeting the most critically at-risk youth, and proactive investigation of children who had never been formally reported missing at all. The combined recoveries across these three operations alone number in the hundreds, with human trafficking charges or referrals emerging from each.

Throughout the year 2025, MEPIC activated 323 state alerts, resulting in 321 missing people being recovered. Separately, MEPIC issued 79 Missing Child Alerts and 7 AMBER Alerts statewide, all tied to the Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC), which logged more than 25,361 missing children entered by Florida law enforcement agencies during the same period.

Each of those alerts represents a child or adult whose disappearance was flagged as potentially endangered and in a growing number of cases, that danger has a name: trafficking.

What MEPIC's Model Reveals

The success of Florida's 2025 operations points to several lessons for the broader missing persons and anti-trafficking community.

Intelligence integration matters. MEPIC's role is not simply to issue alerts; its analysts actively work on missing persons cases, generate investigative leads, and provide support to local law enforcement agencies that may lack the resources to pursue complex cases independently. That analytical backbone was directly responsible for surfacing the trafficking investigation that emerged from the June operation.

The missing persons system is a trafficking detection tool. Children who are being exploited are often reported missing first. A robust, well-resourced clearinghouse system that treats every missing child report with urgency and looks for patterns that suggest exploitation rather than voluntary absence is one of the most effective early-warning systems available to anti-trafficking investigators.

Recovery is not the finish line. Dragon Eye, Home for the Holidays, and LOCATE were each designed with "what happens next" in mind. Embedding social service providers, medical professionals, and child advocates into operations alongside law enforcement ensures that recovered children receive immediate, appropriate care and reduces the likelihood of re-victimization.

Looking Ahead

MEPIC's 2025–2027 Strategic Plan outlines continued priorities around law enforcement training, public awareness, and interagency collaboration. As the agency refines its approach to the missing/trafficking nexus, the results from this past year demonstrate what is possible when investigative infrastructure, federal partnership, and wraparound services work in concert.

For families of the missing, and for advocates working on the front lines of human trafficking prevention, the message from Florida's 2025 operations is clear: when the systems work together, children come home.

To report a missing person in Florida, contact your local law enforcement agency first, then call MEPIC at (850) 410-8585 or toll-free at 1-888-FL-MISSING (1-888-356-4774). You can also reach MEPIC by email at MEPIC@fdle.state.fl.us.



THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (DJJ)

Office of Human Trafficking Intervention



The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) remains committed to statewide initiatives aimed at locating and protecting missing and endangered youth. These efforts are led by the Office of Human Trafficking Intervention under the direction of Dr. Katherine Gomez. DJJ also deploys certified law enforcement analyst Logan McGee, who provides critical intelligence support and conducts case association analysis for youth in the delinquency system with suspected or confirmed histories of human trafficking. Working closely with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's (FDLE) Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse (MEPIC) team and other partners, DJJ contributes investigative support, operational coordination, and ensures youth have access to appropriate services following recovery.

Because some youths are located outside Florida during these operations, DJJ relies on the Interstate Compact on Juveniles (ICJ) to coordinate their safe return. ICJ is a uniform legal agreement used by all 50 states that governs the movement and supervision of youth who have been reported missing, left under supervision, or are under court oversight in another state. In Florida, DJJ's ICJ office works with other state ICJ offices and law enforcement to coordinate the return or transfer of youth found out of state, including during multi-agency recovery operations. This ensures Florida's legal jurisdiction is upheld and youth are safely returned for supervision or appropriate follow-up.

In addition to investigative and operational support, the DJJ Office of Health Services plays a critical role by coordinating medical records and ensuring access to mental health services for youth entering DJJ detention centers. This helps guarantee timely and appropriate care, complementing the department's broader mission to support the safety and well-being of youth.

Over the past year, DJJ has participated in several coordinated operations across Florida focused on locating missing youth and disrupting exploitation networks. These include Operation Dragon Eye, a separate Northeast Florida National Child Protection Task Force (NCPTF) led recovery initiative, Operation Home for the Holidays, and Operation Northern Lights in Northwest Florida. Each operation brought together federal, state, and local partners to combine intelligence, investigative resources, and victim-centered services.

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THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (DJJ)

Office of Human Trafficking Intervention

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During **Operation Dragon Eye**, DJJ personnel supported a large-scale initiative led by the United States Marshals Service (USMS) in collaboration with FDLE and agencies in Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties, alongside additional state and federal partners. The operation resulted in the recovery of more than 60 youth and the arrest of eight adults for crimes against children, including one arrest for human trafficking of a child. Approximately one-third of the recovered youth were known or suspected victims of human trafficking. Dr. Gomez served as Deputy Mission Coordinator, managing operational coordination and interagency collaboration, while Ms. McGee worked with MEPIC analysts to develop intelligence packets and assist in locating youth, including one who had been missing for an extended period.



Operation Dragon Eye Group Photo

DJJ next partnered with the NCPTF during a separate Northeast Florida recovery initiative, which resulted in the location of 25 missing youth. DJJ staff helped identify youth connected to Florida's juvenile justice system and ensured they received appropriate supervision, services, and placement once located.

DJJ also supported **Operation Home for the Holidays**, the largest missing child recovery operation ever conducted in the United States. This two-week initiative recovered 123 children across multiple regions of Florida, including Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, and Fort Myers, and led to six adult arrests tied to crimes against children. FDLE played a pivotal role in mobilizing the resources and coordination needed to ensure the operation's success, while Dr. Gomez served as Deputy Mission Coordinator, assisting with operational planning and leading interagency initiatives. DJJ personnel supported field operations and helped ensure youth connected to the juvenile justice system received necessary services following recovery.

Later in the year, DJJ participated in **Operation Northern Lights** in Northwest Florida, which resulted in the recovery of 43 missing youth, further demonstrating the department's commitment to protecting vulnerable children.



Operation Home for the Holidays Press Conference

Through these operations, DJJ continues to strengthen its partnership with FDLE and MEPIC while advancing its mission to protect public safety and support positive outcomes for Florida's youth. By combining investigative collaboration with coordinated services and supervision, DJJ ensures that vulnerable youth are not only located but also connected to resources that promote long-term safety and stability. Ultimately, DJJ is proud to have supported the recovery of more than 250 youth across these initiatives, helping them return to safe environments and access the services they need to thrive.



Missing Since: 10/14/2010

Missing From: Hollywood, FL

Date of Birth: 01/05/1991 (35)

Yesenia was last seen on October 14, 2010 on the beach at 101 North Ocean Drive in Hollywood, Florida, at the age of 19. She has a scar on her upper left lip and two piercings in each ear.

If you have any information about this case, please contact the Hollywood Police Department at 954-967-4357 or the Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse hotline at 1-888-FL-Missing (1-888-356-4774).

MISSING YESENIA DUVAL-DEL ROSARIO



MISSING NATANALIE PEREZ



Missing Since: 06/01/2012

Missing From: Miami, Florida

Date of Birth: 10/18/1992 (33)

Natanalie was last seen in the Miami, Florida area on June 1, 2012, at the age of 19. She may be in the company of a male, and may be a victim of human trafficking. She has a tattoo on her left wrist and her ears are pierced.

If you have any information about this case, please contact the Miami Police Department at 305-603-6300 or the Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse hotline at 1-888-FL-Missing (1-888-356-4774).



The Florida Department of Children & Families (DCF)

Florida's Ongoing Commitment to Combatting Human Trafficking

By Katia Coonan

Statewide Human Trafficking Prevention Operations Manager

DCF began investigating allegations under the Human Trafficking maltreatment category on May 1, 2009, becoming one of the first states in the nation to formally recognize human trafficking as a form of child abuse and neglect within the child welfare system. This maltreatment remains unique in that it is the only category accepted for investigation regardless of the alleged perpetrator's relationship to the child. Originally encompassing both sex and labor trafficking, in 2013, the maltreatment was formally divided into two distinct categories: Human Trafficking – Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) and Human Trafficking – Labor.

Since its inception, the Human Trafficking Program has evolved significantly. What began with a single position in 2009, grew to four team members by 2015: one statewide manager and three regional coordinators. As of 2025, the program has expanded into a multidisciplinary team of 12 professionals, including dedicated regional coordinators in every region, and specialized roles, such as a human trafficking trainer, policy specialist, and data analyst.

DCF's Human Trafficking Unit plays an active role in 27 local Task Forces and Coalitions across Florida, leading collaborative anti-trafficking efforts. These task forces include law enforcement agencies, the Department of Juvenile Justice State Attorneys, the Attorney General's Office, federal agencies, and community-based partners.

Florida remains a national leader in child anti-trafficking efforts through its survivor-centered, data-driven, and continuously evolving approach to this crime. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024–25, DCF strengthened its infrastructure, improved identification tools, and expanded collaborative initiatives, reaffirming its commitment to protecting vulnerable youth from exploitation.

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The Florida Department of Children & Families (DCF)

Florida's Ongoing Commitment to Combatting Human Trafficking **CONTINUED**

In January 2025, DCF partnered with the University of South Florida to release the "Community Human Trafficking Identification Guide." This public-facing resource is designed to help professionals and community members recognize and report signs of trafficking while emphasizing trauma-informed engagement and mandatory reporting requirements.

Training and outreach remained central to DCF's strategy. In FY 2024-25, the Department and its partners facilitated more than 380 hours of cross-agency training, engaging law enforcement, child welfare professionals, healthcare providers, and other community partners. More than 700 DCF and community-based staff earned Human Trafficking Certifications, and DCF participated in 74 public awareness and outreach events statewide.

In addition to identification and training, safe placement of identified victims remains a key focus. Florida currently operates six licensed safe houses serving female youth and 28 Safe Therapeutic Foster Homes (STFHs) managed by Devereux Florida, Citrus Health Network, National Youth Advocate Program Inc., and Children's Home Network of Hillsborough County. These homes serve all genders. In FY 2024-25, 399 youth were evaluated for placement in safe houses or STFHs.

All youth, regardless of placement, receive wraparound services, including trauma-informed therapy, case management, and advocacy tailored to the needs of trafficking survivors. DCF continues to expand partnerships with mental health and substance abuse providers trained to meet the complex needs of these children.

Florida's fight against child human trafficking has grown far beyond its early beginnings. What was once a pioneering initiative is now a comprehensive, statewide system rooted in professionalism, innovation, and survivor empowerment. Each year, the Department builds on this foundation refining its practices, growing its network, and reaching more youth with life-changing support.

FY 2024-2025 Statistics:

- 2,254 reports received by the Florida Abuse Hotline
- 1,601 children were identified as potential victims of Human Trafficking
- More than 90% of intakes alleged CSEC
- Nearly 10% involved labor trafficking

These figures reflect not just prevalence but also improvements in identification, supported by enhanced regional leadership, statewide training, and the implementation of new tools like the Human Trafficking Identification Assessment (HTIA). Launched in February 2025, the HTIA is now a required component in investigations involving youth ages 10 and up when specific trafficking risk factors are present. More than 730 investigators and supervisors have already been trained in its use.



FROM UNDERCOVER OPERATION TO FOUR LIFE SENTENCES

Leon County Sheriff's Office HEAT Investigation Dismantles Multi-State Trafficking Network



What began as a proactive undercover operation in Leon County in 2023 ultimately led to the dismantling of a multi-state human trafficking operation and four federal life sentences.

During a Leon County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) Human Exploitation and Trafficking (HEAT) Unit undercover operation targeting commercial sexual exploitation, investigators encountered indicators that a woman being advertised for prostitution was not operating independently. Through trauma-informed engagement and investigative follow-up, deputies uncovered evidence that she was being directed and financially controlled by Chad Cornelius Seymore of Dothan, Alabama.

Rather than treating the encounter as a standalone prostitution case, HEAT investigators recognized signs of organized trafficking, including third-party control of advertisements, coordinated travel across state lines, hotel room arrangements, and structured profit-sharing requirements. The focus immediately shifted from arresting individuals engaged in commercial sex to identifying victims, documenting coercion, and building a long-term trafficking investigation.

As investigators worked alongside advocacy partners to ensure victim safety and support, additional information emerged revealing that victims were being transported between Alabama and multiple Florida jurisdictions, including Panama City, Destin, and Fort Walton. Online advertisements were created and managed by Seymore, and communications were conducted through multiple cellular devices and secondary messaging platforms.

Digital forensic analysis of seized phones uncovered text communications coordinating commercial sex appointments and corroborated a structured system in which victims were required to surrender the majority, and sometimes all, of their earnings. Financial tracing and device extraction further strengthened the case, revealing the broader scope of the trafficking network.

The investigation expanded through coordination with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Marshals Service, and law enforcement partners in Alabama. What began as a local undercover operation evolved into a multi-agency, multi-state effort focused on victim recovery and offender accountability.

In 2025, federal indictments were secured. In January 2026, Chad Cornelius Seymore was sentenced to four life sentences in federal prison after being convicted of conspiracy to commit sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion; sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion; receiving benefits from sex trafficking; interstate travel in aid of racketeering; and money laundering.

Co-defendant Kimberly Robinson Gandy was sentenced to twenty-five years in federal prison for her role in the operation.

For the HEAT Unit, the case underscores the importance of proactive enforcement combined with victim-centered investigative practices. By recognizing indicators of exploitation during a routine undercover operation, deputies were able to intervene, support victims, and initiate an investigation that ultimately dismantled a trafficking network operating across state lines.

This case reflects the ongoing commitment of Florida law enforcement agencies to identify victims, disrupt trafficking operations, and pursue meaningful accountability for those who exploit vulnerable individuals.



Honoring Jimmy's Memory



On Friday, June 5, 2026, FDLE Director of Missing Persons and Offender Enforcement Melissa Bujeda joined county commissioners, Sheriff Rosie Cordero-Stutz and the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office, the Jimmy Ryce Center for Victims of Predatory Abduction, elected officials, and members of the FDLE Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse (MEPIC) Advisory Board for the dedication of Jimmy Ryce Avenue in Redland, Miami-Dade County.



On Monday, September 11, 1995, nine-year-old Samuel James "Jimmy" Ryce was on his way home from school when he was abducted at gunpoint and later murdered. In the years following this immense loss, Jimmy's parents, Don and Claudine Ryce, created the Jimmy Ryce Center for Victims of Predatory Abduction, which serves to educate the public about missing children and abduction prevention, as well as provide bloodhounds to law enforcement agencies in the hopes of locating and saving children in situations similar to Jimmy's.

The installation of "Jimmy Ryce Avenue" is not only a tribute to Jimmy's memory; his hopes, dreams, and the incredible compassion demonstrated in his short life, but a tribute to his family, whose resilience and advocacy brought about immense changes in the criminal justice system that continue to save lives today.

"Every day, law enforcement officers, missing child advocates, analysts, investigators, and community members throughout Florida continue this mission. The work we do today in missing child investigations, child recovery efforts, and offender enforcement is part of a legacy that was shaped by Jimmy's story. His name became synonymous with a commitment to ensuring that no family faces such a tragedy without every available resource dedicated to bringing their child home."

— Melissa Bujeda, Director of Missing Persons and Offender Enforcement, FDLE





SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

Labor Trafficking Crews & Illegitimate Charities

By Karen Mazzola, Florida PTA

Recently, I encountered two teens selling candy outside a local store without any visible adult supervision. Situations like this can sometimes involve youth exploitation, so I contacted the non-emergency police line to report the concern. This situation led me to wonder how common this type of exploitation is, and ask whether or not it is happening in my community.

Across the country, law enforcement has uncovered operations where minors are recruited or pressured to sell candy or merchandise for fake charities or criminal groups. These schemes often involve long hours, little oversight, and profits that are taken by adults. Notably, in Florida's 2024-2025 State Fiscal Year, 9.7% of reports accepted by the Florida Abuse Hotline specifically involved labor trafficking. This marks a substantial 26.7% increase of labor trafficking reports when compared to the previous State Fiscal Year.

Traveling Sales Crews

According to the Polaris Project, traveling sales crews go door-to-door, often selling fraudulent products such as magazine subscriptions that customers may not ever receive. These crews frequently move between cities and states, and may change their name and location under the same management to avoid detection by law enforcement. Salespeople involved in these schemes are rarely fully compensated, work long hours, and are unable to leave due to fraud, manipulation, and coercion. The victims in traveling sales crews are overwhelmingly United States citizens. Victims who want to leave these crews are often abandoned in remote, unfamiliar areas, with no belongings or means of returning home.

Forced Peddling & Begging

Forced peddling and begging is a well-known type of labor trafficking throughout the world. While data is limited regarding this type of labor trafficking, it often involves the exploitation of young children and teenagers by using them to sell candy or baked goods or solicit donations from people in crowded public areas. Some case data has shown that victims of forced peddling and begging often have familiar links with their traffickers, forcing more vulnerable family members into begging (Polaris Project).

These methods of exploitation are used throughout the United States and around the world. For example, in January of 2026, two fraudulent nonprofits in Maryland and Virginia were shut down after authorities discovered they were recruiting children from low-income neighborhoods to sell candy door-to-door, telling customers that their proceeds would fund scholarships and enrichment for at-risk kids. In reality, the proceeds were being used for the personal benefit of the owners.

If something feels wrong, it just might be, and it is better to be safe than sorry. If you encounter what seems to be a traveling sales crew or are asked to donate money or purchase candy or other goods from minors without visible adult supervision, think twice. If you encounter what you suspect may be labor trafficking, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline by calling 1-888-373-7888, texting "HELP" or "INFO" to 233733, or using the live chat on the National Human Trafficking Hotline website.

Resources:

- Polaris Project (2017). *The Typology of Modern Slavery*. <https://polarisproject.org/resources/the-typology-of-modern-slavery-defining-sex-and-labor-trafficking-in-the-united-states/>



Meet the MEPIC Advisory Board's New Chair

Darry D. Lloyd

Darry Lloyd has worked in law enforcement as a sworn officer for 31 years. He is currently the Chief Investigator for the 8th Judicial Circuit State Attorney's Office, which covers 6 North Central Florida Counties. Darry graduated from the 269th session of the FBI National Academy. He currently serves as the Moderator for the Gainesville Police Black on Black Crime Taskforce, is the Past Secretary for the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, Adkins Warren Chapter, as well as the Florida State Social Action Director of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.

Locally, Darry serves as a Deacon at Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church under the spiritual leadership of Dr. F.N. Gallmon. Darry is also the past Youth Department Director, a member of The Innovators, and serves in the production room.

In June of 2009, Darry Lloyd joined the 8th Judicial Circuit investigative family. Lloyd currently serves the citizens of Alachua, Levy, Bradford, Baker, Union, and Gilchrist County. Darry was appointed as Deputy Chief Investigator/Spokesperson by State Attorney William Cervone. Upon election of State Attorney Brian Kramer, Darry was appointed as Chief Investigator. Prior to joining the State Attorney's Office family, Lloyd was employed with the Gainesville Police Department, Florida Department of Law Enforcement Capitol Police, The State Fire Marshal's Office Bureau of Fire and Arson Investigations, and the Alachua Police Department. Chief Investigator Lloyd's previous experience includes working as a crime prevention officer, property crimes detective, arson/homicide investigator, public information officer, and youth programs director. Chief Investigator Lloyd has received commendations for being a leader in major investigations as well as Officer of the Year and Officer of the Quarter honors.

Chief Investigator Lloyd also served as Secretary of the Gainesville Florida Housing Corporation, and was a board member of the Education Foundation of Alachua County and the Lofton Professional Academies Magnet School Advisory Committees. This year, Darry was recognized by Phi Beta Sigma as the Southern Region Social Action Director of the Year for the State of Florida. Additionally, he received the NAACP Thomas A. Wright Award in recognition of his leadership and community service. Darry also volunteers as a guest speaker to several churches and youth groups.



Meet the MEPIC Advisory Board's New Vice Chair

Major Mark Hensley

Major Mark Hensley joined the MEPIC Advisory Board in February 2023. He is a proud father, and has served with the City of St. Petersburg Police Department since 2002, including assignments in Uniform Services, Investigative Services, Administrative Services, and the Office of the Chief. He is currently responsible for the Training Division and Emergency Communications Division. He is a graduate of Eckerd College, IACP's Leadership in Police Organizations, FDLE's Executive Leadership Seminar, and PERF's Senior Management Institute for Police.