



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Sanders Jr.

Senator James Sanders Jr. Hosts Leadership Dinner and Discusses the Epidemic of Human Trafficking

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Senator James Sanders Jr. (D-Rochdale Village, Far Rockaway) held a community leadership dinner at the Springfield Gardens Church of the Nazarene on January 23, 2020, where experts and advocates presented important information on the global epidemic of human sex trafficking which is also afflicting the local community in Queens.

According to 2019 report by the U.S. Department of State, human sex trafficking is one of the most horrible crimes on Earth, impacting people's freedom and human dignity. It is reported that a figure of 24.9 million people are currently being sex trafficked.

"This is a serious epidemic and it is our duty to protect our community, particularly our youth, from being exploited for the purpose of commercial sex or forced labor," Sanders said. "We need to stop this victimization before it starts, because once these traffickers get a hold of someone they will use psychological and physical coercion to prevent them from leaving."

Among the speakers at Senator Sanders' event were representatives from UNITAS, an international humanitarian organization working to provide solutions in the fight against human trafficking, Detectives from the NYPD Human Trafficking Team, and Nicky Sunshine an actress, comedienne and writer, who shared her own experience of engaging in sex work as a massage parlor madam.

Lamont Hiebert, UNITAS Program Director, discussed the different types of human trafficking, which can include labor trafficking and sex trafficking and explained that all types usually involve force (violence, starvation, and confinement), fraud (lies, tricks, and false promises) and coercion (threats, debt bondage, and drugs). Youth are especially vulnerable because the trafficker will identify the victim's need – food, clothing, shelter, etc. – and fill that void, leading the victim to become trapped and dependent.

Hiebert was joined by Tonya Turner, UNITAS Training and Education Director, and Dr. Coralanne Griffith-Hunte, UNITAS Board Member, psychologist and clinical trauma specialist.

"These victims feel broken," said Dr. Griffith-Hunte. "Trauma doesn't have an expiration date and when it comes to trauma, there is no one-size-fits-all solution."

If someone is being forced to engage in sex for money, a place to live, for other necessities, or because someone is holding their important documents like a passport, they may be a victim of trafficking, according to the NYPD. Detective Olashina Williams of the NYPD Human Trafficking Team explained that this crime is getting worse in Queens, with many young men choosing to pimp women instead of selling drugs because they see it as a less dangerous way to make fast cash. When it comes to helping victims, Williams said, "You have to engage them where they are. They feel judged. They feel shame."

Nicky Sunshine spoke about her time as sex worker at a "rub and tug" massage parlor and admitted that she felt ashamed of what she was doing but became addicted to the easy money. "There's a value system in our society," she said. "As a black woman, I did not know how vulnerable I was." Now, she uses her platform as a public figure to educate and warn others.

The Rev. Lenroy Pascall, Pastor of the Springfield Gardens Church of the Nazarene, where the event was held, said he has noticed that more and more of his congregants have confided in him that they have been trafficked. "I don't think any human being should have to go through that," he said, adding that he believes the perpetrators must be experiencing some type of "spiritual and psychological madness" to commit such crimes.