

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

HUMAN TRAFFICKING: IT’S HAPPENING IN OUR OWN NEIGHBORHOODS

Crude oil. Coffee. Gold. Sugar. Cotton. They’re among the most widely traded commodities in the world — raw materials that are collected and used to produce what we need for everyday living. Commodities form the basis of our economy.

But it’s not just commodities that are being bought and sold. Tragically, there is also a flourishing slave trade that deals in people — most often, girls and young women — for purposes of sexual or labor exploitation. Their average age of entry is 16 years old.

Human trafficking is big business: about \$150 billion a year and growing. That’s about three times the size of the global sugar market.

I became more aware of the trafficking problem when the National Conflict Resolution Center recognized San Diego resident Buki Domingos as a local peacemaker of the year, at our 2019 Peacemaker Awards dinner.

Born in Nigeria, Domingos came to the United States in 2013. Unknowingly, she became enmeshed in a human trafficking

scheme, forced to perform as a singer without pay. After escaping her situation, Domingos used her voice in song and speeches to raise awareness of the issue. She focused on the plight of Black immigrant women, who are disproportionately victimized.

Still, I thought of trafficking as something that largely occurred far away, with victims transported across state lines or international borders.

Recently, I attended a fundraiser for a local nonprofit organization called Free to Thrive, which provides legal and support services to human trafficking survivors. I learned the pervasiveness of trafficking right here in San Diego County — in many of our own neighborhoods, as a matter of fact.

According to the FBI, San Diego is ranked among the 13 worst regions in the United States for human trafficking, with as many 8,000 victims each year.

As a business, trafficking generates more than \$810 million annually for San Diego’s underground economy, second only to

the drug trade.

It’s not a matter of kids being plucked off our streets. Deception, coercion and force are the tools favored by human traffickers. Sometimes, the perpetrators are “insiders” like family members, boyfriends and peers. The risk of trafficking is unsurprisingly greatest among the most vulnerable, including runaways and youth who are homeless or living in foster care. Victims often share a history of child abuse or domestic violence.

COVID-19 whipped up a perfect storm for online predators. Tips of online recruitment of children, as reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, nearly doubled from 6.3 million in the first half of 2019 to 12 million in the first half of 2020.

In the war against human trafficking, early intervention is crucial. So, too, is collaboration. Young lives are at risk. So this issue deserves our immediate attention.

Along with Free to Thrive and other local nonprofit organizations, the San Diego County Dis-

trict Attorney’s Office is actively combatting human trafficking through its Sex Crimes and Human Trafficking Unit. It includes prosecutors, investigators, paralegals, victim advocates and staff who are working together on all fronts: detection, prevention, education and prosecution. Similarly, the U.S. Attorney’s Office established a Violent Crimes and Human Trafficking Section in 2019 to lead collaborations between federal and local law enforcement for the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases.

We have to educate ourselves on the warning signs of human trafficking and know what to do if we suspect it. Too often, the people who are closest to trafficking victims — parents, teachers, friends — are unaware of abuse happening right in front of their eyes.

Knowledge can make a real difference. In 2007, a national organization called Truckers Against Trafficking (TAT) was established for members of the trucking, bus and energy industries. TAT — which positions itself

as the “eyes and ears of our nation’s highways” — has trained more than 1 million truck drivers, store cashiers and other staff to take action when they observe suspicious or unusual behavior, consistent with trafficking. So far, the training has resulted in 2,692 calls made on behalf of 1,296 potential trafficking victims.

Calls are made to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a 24/7 resource for getting help when a human trafficking situation is observed. Victims can call the hotline to be connected with local law enforcement and social service providers who can help them get out of exploitative situations and into a safe environment.

The toll-free number is 1-888-373-7888. I’ve put it into my phone. You should, too. It could save the most precious commodity of all: a life.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com.

GEARS • This year’s ride has largest number of participants, raised record sum

FROM B1
ting her confidence and competitive spirit back with a loaner bike from Challenged Athletes. She plans to write a second book that will include Molly’s Million Dollar Challenge ride experience.

“I have a story of survival,” she said, “but it’s a guide to somebody else going through a struggle and about listening to your gut and not giving up and uncovering the answers that you know are there.”

CAF Million Dollar Challenge chairman Dean Roeper said hearing stories like Pinard’s is why he joined CAF’s board and has co-chaired the MDC event for the past 12 years. A San Diego real estate attorney who cycles about 4,000 miles a year, Roeper said he signed up for his first MDC ride in 2008 to rebuild his strength and endurance after a knee replacement. Instead, he fell in love with the CAF mission.

During that first seven-day ride from San Francisco to San Diego, Roeper rode alongside a veteran Army Ranger who lost a leg in the second battle of Fallujah in Iraq. He was pedaling the 640-mile trek with a prosthetic limb.

“When you meet people who get a grant for a running leg and it opens them up to a whole new world of possibilities, there’s nothing quite as tangible as watching that result,” Roeper said. “Sports shouldn’t be a luxury item. It’s something we should all be able to access as part of our humanity.”

Over the years, Roeper said the MDC has faced its share of challenges. There were two years when it rained all seven days on the riders, and two years when wildfires forced changes in the route. In 2020, the event was canceled altogether because of the pandemic. But because of that year off, this

year’s ride has the most riders ever and a record amount of money raised.

“People are so hungry to be back in community with one another,” Roeper said.

The full MDC ride — which will include 160 cyclists, of which 20 are physically challenged — begins Oct. 15 at Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. When the peloton of cyclists arrives at Bonita Cove on Mission Bay on Oct. 22, it will kick off three days of events, including an open water swim, children’s adaptive surf event and clinics for running, mobility, wheelchair tennis and swimming. The weekend finale will be the 28th San Diego Triathlon Challenge, which includes a 1-mile swim, 44-mile bike ride and 10-minute run. About 200 challenged athletes will be among the 600 participants. Through these and other events, CAF has raised more than \$130 million and awarded nearly 32,000 grants to athletes since 1994.

That’s not bad for an organization that was initially created by three San Diego friends — Bob Babbitt, Jeffrey Essakow and Rick Kozlowski — who were only looking to do a one-time favor for a friend.

In 1992, below-the-knee amputee Jim MacLaren made headlines by finishing the Ironman World Championship in 10 hours, 42 minutes. But a year later, he was rendered quadriplegic when a car struck his bike during an Orange County triathlon. MacLaren needed \$25,000 for a hand-controlled van, so the trio organized the 1994 Tri Challenge to raise it.

At the time, Babbitt was the publisher of Competitor Magazine, Essakow was an accountant for triathlete Scott Tinley’s sportswear company and Kozlowski had



(From left) Jeffrey Essakow, Dean Roeper and Kristine Entwistle are all involved in the Challenged Athletes Foundation.

started his now-long-established special events firm Koz Events. The first Tri Challenge raised \$49,000 and attracted both able-bodied athletes like Tinley and a handful of female amputees who had been inspired to compete by MacLaren. But after an article and photos of the event ran in The San Diego Union-Tribune, Essakow said his phone started “ringing off the hook.”

“People were calling and asking for help. And a friend of mine, who I didn’t know at the time, told me, ‘you’ve got a tiger by the tail. I want to underwrite you hiring someone to run this organization for the first year,’” said Essakow, now a La Jolla real estate investor and developer who is CAF’s president and chairman of the board.

Within a year, the nonprofit CAF was established and it has been growing and expanding ever

since. One of the organization’s early growing pains was finding permanent office space. To solve that problem, the Million Dollar Challenge was created 16 years ago to raise enough cash to buy a building that Essakow said could be CAF’s home “forever and ever, amen.”

With the roughly \$3 million in proceeds from the first three rides, Essakow bought CAF’s headquarters building in Sorrento Mesa for just \$1.6 million cash in a court auction. The rest of the money was used to renovate the building. The headquarters at 9591 Waples St. has an adaptive sports gym, indoor wheelchair basketball half-court, educational classrooms, offices and more.

Over the past 15 years, the Million Dollar Challenge has raised \$20 million and hosted close to 1,000 individual riders who have,

collectively, cycled more than 18 million miles.

Essakow said that the Million Dollar Challenge is not a race, but an introduction to a new “family” and way of thinking. One of Essakow’s friends who has taken part in the ride once told him: “I came for a bike ride and I’m leaving with an attitude adjustment to life.”

“People are very moved by the event,” said Essakow, who was born and raised in South Africa. “There’s an African word, ‘ubuntu,’ which means I am because of who you are and you are because of who I am.’ It’s a symbiotic relationship. That’s what MDC is all about. It’s a humbling experience riding down the coast of California with someone riding next to you lying on his back and pedaling with his hands.”

Essakow said that besides serving its clientele — which includes elite athletes who have competed in the Paralympic Games and non-athletes who simply want to improve their lives through sport — CAF has worked to change cultural attitudes about people with limb loss, paralysis or other disabilities. On the wall of his office, Essakow has hung a drawing by his young son that shows several stick figures running a race. The winner of the race is a figure with a prosthetic leg.

“When we started, there was such a stigma associated with people who were physically challenged, but today nobody really notices someone without an arm or a leg,” he said. “My son’s drawing represents to me everything I’ve stood for over the past 26 years. He doesn’t see the difference, which tells me we’ve accomplished our goals.”

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COUNTY

FROM B1
maintain “reasonably equal population,” comply with the Voting Rights Act, be contiguous and geographically compact, and avoid dividing cities, neighborhoods, and “communities of interest,” according to the commission.

That covers “everything from communities like Asian Pacific Islander communities, to communities drawn by shared experiences as immigrants and refugees, to economic and social ties across geographic features, like coasts or even highway corridors,” Bame said.

In a recent comment to the commission, Paradise Hills resident Makhfira Abdullahi urged commissioners to retain Southeastern San Diego within one district, citing residents’ shared experience as immigrants.

“Our community has shared languages, cultural practices, food, and common goals for our families, children, and community members,” Abdullahi wrote. “Given the diversity of our area, the languages of Spanish,

Tagalog, Oromo, and Somali are often spoken within my community, as we also celebrate events and holidays together. We are immigrants, refugees, or children of immigrants and refugees.”

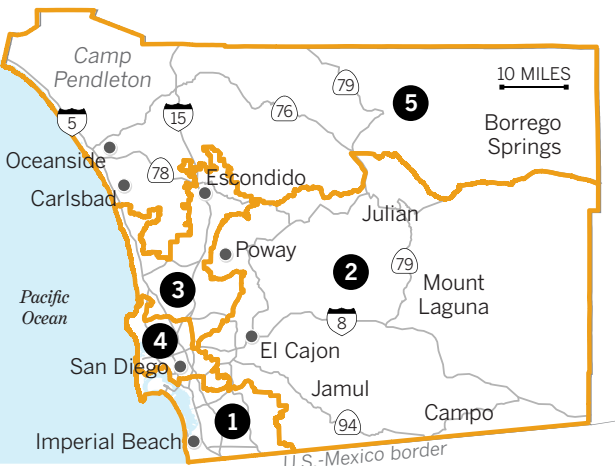
Similarly, Rebekkah Naputi asked commissioners to keep North County communities together in a single district.

“I strongly oppose redistricting the North County Area, which if separated, is a cause for major concern and has the possibility of creating numerous problems throughout the community,” Naputi wrote. “North County has many different cities, unincorporated areas, ethnicity, and cultural diversity; however, it is one community.”

Encinitas resident Mark O’Connor said he would like to see coastal cities grouped separately from inland areas.

“Living in a coastal community, I see that many of the needs here are different than inland communities,” O’Connor wrote. “I would like this commission to look at creating districts that run up and down the coast, North-South versus running

San Diego County Board of Supervisors Districts



Source: San Diego County

MICHELLE GILCHRIST U-T

West-East.”

The commission is operating on a shortened schedule to draw and finalize the maps, because the pandemic delayed the census data needed to redraw the boundaries.

San Diego County has seen a 6.6 percent population increase over the past decade, according to the census, with the addition of 203,301 residents. But some districts

experienced more growth than others. No district in San Diego County showed a decline in population.

District 3, represented by Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer, saw the largest change, with an increase of 8.6 percent. That’s followed by District 5, where Supervisor Jim Desmond’s area grew by 7.5 percent.

District 4, represented by Board of Supervisors Chair

Nathan Fletcher, grew the least, by 4.9 percent.

The commission and its demographer must draw the lines to equalize populations within the districts, while also considering public comments on how the changes will affect local communities. Moving the boundaries of one district may require adjustments to others, Bame said.

“It’s not that different from putting together a really complicated jigsaw puzzle,” he said.

Some important dates are coming up.

The commission will present some options, or draft maps, at its Oct. 14 meeting, and it will hold two public hearings on Nov. 2 and Dec. 2 to seek input before approving a final map on Dec. 15, Bame said.

Members of the public can also submit their own proposed maps using digital tools on the commission website. The deadline for members of the public to submit map proposals is Dec. 2.

The 14-member commission consists of six Democrats, four Republicans and four independent or “no

party preference” voters, which is in proportion to the partisan ratios of San Diego’s registered voters.

Democratic members are: co-chair Amy Caterina, an investor relations and corporate communications consultant in the biotechnology industry; Sonia Diaza, nonprofit manager with Kitchens for Good; Elidia C. Dostal, a business attorney; Kenneth Inman, a retired executive; Arv Lawson, an electrical engineer and computer scientist; and Fernandez “Frank” Ponds, a retired admiral.

The Republican members are: retired California state auditor Colleen Brown; energy industry consultant Chris Chen; retired educator and nonprofit manager Barbara Thompson Hansen; and retired Navy officer and mechanical engineer John Russ.

Non-partisan members are: Bame; English professor Carmen Rosette-Garcia; bioinformatics scientist Kristina Kruglyak; and urban planner Ramesses Surban.

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CENTER

FROM B1
Tri-City Medical Center in Oceanside provided the spark that ignited the county’s current mental health rethink in 2018 when its leaders announced they would close the public hospital district’s inpatient mental health unit and crisis stabilization center, citing the need for significant safety upgrades and ongoing financial and staffing issues.

Today, the hospital’s inpatient mental health capacity remains shuttered. In early 2020, the county gave Tri-City \$17 million to build a new 16-bed behavioral health hospital on vacant land on the western side of the hospi-

tal campus.

Though a completion date for the Tri-City facility was not available Thursday, records show that plans were submitted to the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development in June.

The Tri-City shutdown in 2018 put additional pressure on other area hospitals — especially Palomar Medical Center in Escondido — to take up the slack.

There were 1,109 people picked up on “5150” holds in Oceanside alone in 2020, according to city records. 5150 refers to the section of legal code that allows law enforcement to restrain and detain those who, in their judgment, may be a danger to themselves or others. Though the most-severe cases will still

need to be taken to hospitals, a significant percentage is expected to be dropped off at the Vista center, which opened at 9 a.m. Friday.

Because they are not located in hospitals and are not connected to general-purpose emergency departments, stand-alone crisis-stabilization centers offer a more streamlined arrival process. There is no chance that patients with more immediate life-threatening health care problems from heart attacks to strokes will continually push mental health patients lower on the triage list.

Undersheriff Kelly Martinez of the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department noted during Thursday’s opening ceremony in

Vista that law enforcement officers tend to keep those brought in on 5150 calls restrained until they can be transferred to the custody of health care providers.

“Spending eight hours with a deputy sheriff in handcuffs in an emergency room is just not acceptable,” Martinez said. “It’s not the way that it should be.”

The problem has been that patients too often get treatment only when they reach crisis, cycling in and out of facilities month after month, year after year. The key to breaking that cycle, studies have shown, is getting patients enrolled in the long-term resources they need after they are stabilized and discharged.

Luana Murphy, president

and chief executive of Exodus Recovery, said the Vista location was chosen in large part due to its proximity to the office of the area’s mobile crisis response team. That rapid-reaction force of mental health clinicians, peer support specialists and other non-law-enforcement personnel is sent on crisis calls that do not involve known threats of violence or other medical emergencies. Agencies that help residents with developmental disabilities and substance abuse problems are also nearby, as is an outpatient mental health provider operated by Tri-City.

“The partners we need to work with are already here,” Murphy said.

Though mere proximity,

and the fact that Exodus was already operating a walk-up mental health unit out of the same complex, seemed to make the location a no-brainer, creating the stabilization center still took years due to opposition from local leaders.

County Supervisor Jim Desmond, whose district includes Vista, said Thursday that it took some time to persuade City Council members and others that the county did not intend to simply deliver all local mental health cases to Vista. He applauded the fact that consensus was eventually reached.

“I say this with no exaggeration; this is going to save lives,” Desmond said.

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