

## County police, feds target human traffickers Suspected brothel in Glen Burnie busted

By SCOTT DAUGHERTY, Staff Writer

County police teamed up with federal agents late last month to fight human trafficking in Glen Burnie and Crofton. The "search-and-rescue" operation shut down a suspected Mexican brothel in Glen Burnie and prompted agents to send at least one suspected prostitute to a Baltimore nonprofit group to receive help.

It is unclear what happened in Crofton, however. Federal officials said the human-trafficking operation focused on the quiet suburb Feb. 26 and 27, but refused to say exactly what group or organization was targeted.

No charges related specifically to the trafficking of humans for the purposes of prostitution and forced labor were filed in connection with the raids -- the first of their kind by the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force, of which the Anne Arundel County Police Department is a member. And prosecutors stopped short of calling the prostitute a victim of human trafficking.

Marcia Murphy, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's Office, still described the operation as a "success."

"I think this will make a dent...in the long run," she said, adding that the operation was a chance for the different agencies involved with the task force members to work together. Similar operations are planned throughout Maryland over the next several months, she said.

"You have to take small steps before you get to the big payoff," she said.

The operation netted at least one case.

Police charged Edgar Hernandez, 35, of Glen Burnie, and Jonathan Rivera-Lopez, 30, of Riverdale, in state court with various prostitution charges related to the operation of the brothel at 805 Marigold Rd. Hernandez also was charged with possession of cocaine.

According to court records, a confidential informant tipped police to a "Mexican cantina." The tipster said men could arrange to meet prostitutes at the Glen Burnie address or have the prostitutes come to them. The prostitutes were always accompanied by male drivers and bodyguards.

Police said the men operating the brothel charged "johns" \$30 for 15 minutes. Johns would receive a purple stone for each \$30 they paid. Those stones would be given to the prostitute, who would in turn redeem them for her cut at the end of the day.

Police staked out the house and noticed cars coming and going, with people staying only about 10 minutes. At night, according to court records, police would notice an upstairs bedroom light come on after men entered.

Agents raided the house about 1:45 p.m. Feb. 27 after calling the number on a business card for the brothel and learning a prostitute was available. Inside, they found Hernandez and Rivera-Lopez, as well as a 20-year-old woman who was not charged with any crime.

Hernandez said he moved to the house about three weeks before the raids. It was largely unfurnished, save for a few mattresses on the floor, police said.

After the raid, police sent the woman to You Are Never Alone, a Baltimore facility dedicated to helping prostitutes and victims of human trafficking.

Sidney Ford, executive director and founder of the group, said federal officials asked her not to speak about the Anne Arundel raids. Speaking in general terms, she said it's not unusual for human traffickers to open brothels in the suburbs.

"There is trafficking almost everywhere you can think of," she said, noting that such activity might actually be easier in the suburbs, since there is more distance between homes. "It can happen right under your nose."

Anne Arundel County joined the task force at its inception in December 2007.

One detective from the county's Vice Unit works part-time with task force. He was deputized as a "federal marshal."

"This deputization allows the detective to cross jurisdictional lines in an effort to investigate these criminal enterprises and assist in rescuing the victims who are often times being trafficked for prostitution," said Sgt. John Gilmer, county police spokesman.

<http://www.hometownannapolis.com/news/nbh/2009/03/08-15/County-police-feds-target-human-traffickers.html>