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Media Contact: Kitti Asberry
(405) 401-6970
Pakita.Asberry@omes.ok.gov

Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women Launches Anti-Human Trafficking Series and Not Me Educational Initiative

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Each year, an estimated 4,000 Oklahomans seek help from human trafficking situations. The Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women will launch two anti-human trafficking educational efforts -- series of *Community Conversations to Stop Human Trafficking* at schools and a *Not Me* initiative.

"Human trafficking is modern-day slavery," said Commission State Chair Brenda Jones Barwick. "It's a \$150 billion a year industry and Oklahoma is not immune to it. Most human trafficking in Oklahoma is not happening by people passing through on highways, but by Oklahomans who are family members, friends or acquaintances entrapping Oklahomans into involuntary servitude through labor, sex or drugs."

The series of *Community Conversations to Stop Human Trafficking* will be held at high schools, colleges and universities statewide to educate Oklahoma teens, young adults, teachers and parents on how to recognize early signs of a person being targeted for human trafficking servitude. The first Community Conversation will be held at Seminole State College on Thursday, Jan. 12, at Noon in the Jeff Johnstone Fine Arts Center ballroom with community leaders, following a 9:30 am panel discussion with students and faculty.

Community Conversations will feature a panel of Oklahoma professionals and experts on several aspects of human trafficking to provide a full spectrum of the issue in Oklahoma. Panelists will include non-profits that are providing healing and recovery services and resources to people entrapped into human trafficking situations; tribal and ethnic groups whose populations have experienced a high level of people forced into involuntary slavery; and law enforcement and drug interdiction officers who have been trained to recognize the signs of a bondage situation.

Labor trafficking is the most prevalent type of human trafficking. Its recruitment, harboring and transportation by force, fraud or coercion is most found in industries, such as agriculture, including marijuana farms, domestic workers in homes or hotels, and manufacturing or restaurant workers in inhumane environments with low wages.

The second educational effort is a statewide *Not Me* initiative, also launched on Thursday at Seminole State College, to stop human trafficking and to raise awareness in recognizing early signs of human trafficking. The *Not Me* initiative will promote resources to seek help, such as hotlines, text number, a website, and several Oklahoma non-profit groups that are providing services to those who have been forced into a human trafficking situation.

For the first time, the Commission is focusing on prevention of human trafficking. Barwick stated, "The focus has been on dealing with human trafficking after the crime has occurred. Many are unaware they are being trafficked because it is typically a slow, methodical recruitment process by a trusted relationship. We will educate Oklahomans to recognize the first, second and third typical approach by traffickers and empower Oklahomans to stand strong and say 'Not Me' to the trafficker."

The Commission began its work on human trafficking in 2014 when it partnered with the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics to host *Solutions, Initiatives, Strategies on Human Trafficking Summit*. In 2020, First Lady Sarah Stitt hosted a summit on this topic at the Governor's Mansion with a panel of experts. Additional information about the Commission's work on human trafficking, including a White Paper published last year, can be found at <https://oklahoma.gov/ocsw/human-trafficking.html>.

For more information to schedule a *Community Conversation* or obtain *Not Me* materials, contact the Commission at ocswadmin@omes.ok.gov or call 405-401-6970.

For more information on the Seminole State College events, contact Professor Christal Knowles at 405-382-9207 or c.knowles@sscok.edu for the morning session and Seminole Chamber of Commerce at 405-382-3640 for the noon event.

The Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women is an official state agency that advises the Governor and legislature on recommendations to strengthen and empower women by identifying issues to improve their quality of life and economic opportunities. It comprises 30 commissioners appointed by the Governor, Senate President Pro Tempore and Speaker of the House, as well as an Advisory Council of men and women who have an expertise on issues that impact women. Visit the Commission website at www.oklahoma.gov/ocsw.