

# Stop Trafficking!

# Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's newsletter highlights human trafficking in the hotel industry.

*The hospitality industry is highly vulnerable to human traffickers, especially when it comes to child sexual exploitation and forced prostitution, forced criminality, and forced labor in hotels or their supply chains. According to the Polaris Project, 75% of human trafficking survivors report having come into contact with hotels during their trafficking experience. At the same time, the European hospitality industry estimates there are 1.14 million victims in the industry, with 80% for sexual exploitation and 20% for forced labor in restaurants, bars, and hotels.*

*Unfortunately, according to Polaris, 94% of survivors say hotel staff did not show concern nor offer any help. Recent lawsuits by survivors against hotels and hotel chains may make it more important for establishments to implement reforms to protect people from becoming victims in the future.*

## Why are hotels vulnerable to human trafficking?

Using data from the Human Trafficking Hotline number, the Polaris Project found that 75% of human trafficking survivors reported coming into contact with hotels at some point during their trafficking situation. Meanwhile, the European hospitality industry reports an estimated 1.14 million victims of human trafficking in the European hospitality industry alone, and 80% of these victims are being trafficked for sexual exploitation, with 20% being used for forced labor in hotels, bars and restaurants.

Hotels, particularly those with lax security measures, provide an ideal environment for traffickers. They offer anonymity, easy access, and a transient clientele, making it difficult for authorities to detect and track illegal activities.

Corporate culture and practices that could increase vulnerability include the lack of background checks on new employees which prevents the hiring of employees already working for a gang or pimp. Employees also may lack education on “red flags” and how to report suspected trafficking.

Pimps will book rooms for their victims and their clients using automated systems for check-ins/check-outs, third-party reservation systems, and non-mandatory registration and identification, preventing hoteliers and staff from knowing the real identity of their customers. The possibility of paying for rooms in cash and being able to up and leave at a moment's notice also makes hotels an attractive choice vulnerable to human traffickers.

Moreover, many hotels have a high staff turnover or use subcontractors, resulting in staff being unfamiliar with their environments and concerned that they won't be taken seriously if they report their suspicions.

## Role of Technology in Facilitating Human Trafficking

*The role of technology in facilitating human trafficking in hotels is apparent. Automated hotel check-in, check-out, and online reservation systems are all ways in which technology limits interaction between hotel staff and guests, decreasing potential points where hotel staff could spot many of the “red flags” of trafficking. Moreover, hotel amenities such as WiFi and, in some cases, computers could be used by traffickers to advertise their victims and solicit “buyers.”*



# Awareness

## Sex Trafficking in Hotels

Many sex trafficking victims are not hidden in corners of society, but are walking past you in the hotel lobby, sharing the hotel elevator with you, or even suffering on the other side of your hotel room wall.

Sex trafficking can occur in hotels with either the trafficker booking a room for a victim and “buyers” coming to the hotel room or the victim going to the “buyers” hotel room.

Some signs of sex trafficking occurring in the hotel include:

- Paying for the room in cash or prepaid credit card. The parties are reluctant to provide IDs at check-in.
- Having little to no luggage
- The suspected victim has signs of poor hygiene, malnourishment, and fatigue
- There is evidence of verbal threats and/or physical violence
- The suspected victim exhibits a fearful, nervous, anxious, or submissive demeanor
- There is excessive foot traffic in and out of rooms
- The victim extends their stay day by day and has little to no possession
- The guests require additional housekeeping services such as towels but deny staff access to the room
- Excessive amounts of sex paraphernalia in rooms (condoms, lubricant, lotion, etc.)
- The same person reserves multiple rooms

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Hotel Employees Have Facilitated Sex Trafficking

There are reports that some hotel employees not only do not report signs of sex trafficking but directly cooperate with traffickers. Some employees accept bribes in the form of sex with victims, money, or drugs. They serve as police lookouts or will reserve certain rooms, such as by a back entrance, for returning traffickers. In a court case, [Doe vs. Red Roof Inns, Inc.](#), victims testified that employees took payment in drugs or cash while “a single-sex trafficker completely controlled the third floor of the hotel.”

Meanwhile, housekeeping staff and front desk workers witnessed victims in hotel hallways with visible injuries and blood stains from victims in hotel rooms. In one case, housekeeping allegedly found a victim tied up in her room, begging for help, but took no action.

According to [Polaris](#), most survivors report that they did not receive any assistance or concern from hotel staff during their trafficking experience. This may be due to a lack of training on human trafficking recognition and reporting protocols for hotel staff.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Labor Trafficking and Hotels

Labor trafficking may also occur in the hotel industry. At the hotel itself, this can look like preventing employees from taking breaks, using immigration status to hold power over an employee, not providing fair pay, and verbal or physical abuse by a supervisor. Victims can include front-house staff, food service workers, and housekeeping.

Some of these employees hold jobs through subcontractors. Due to these employees not being direct hotel hires, they are much more vulnerable to abuse, such as lack of pay and working unfit hours. Some signs that could indicate labor trafficking include employees who isolate themselves from the other employees and do overtime shifts as much as possible.

Moreover, hotels usually do not check the labor practices of outside vendors that provide food or clean linen.

*An estimated 80 percent of sex trafficking takes place at hotels today.*

Click [here](#) to learn more.



## The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), passed in 2000, was the first federal law to address human trafficking in the United States. The law aims to combat trafficking by establishing a framework for protection, prevention, and prosecution.

In 2003, legislators added a provision to allow victims to sue their traffickers in civil court. Then, in 2008, legislators expanded the law to allow victims to sue anyone who benefitted from a trafficking enterprise and knew, or could have known, that exploitation was happening. This significant amendment indicated that victims could begin to pursue cases against companies that failed to certify that their businesses were free of exploitation.

This has profound implications for businesses, as legal action may result from failure to intervene, allowing the crime for financial gain, or employee participation in trafficking.

In 2004, a civil trafficking case was filed against a hotel regarding forced labor. It was not until 2015 that the [first sex trafficking case](#) was filed against a hotel, when the victim filed a claim against the Shangri-La Motel in Seekonk, Massachusetts. This case, which was subject to several appeals and delays, finally settled on the second day of trial, with the plaintiff receiving an undisclosed amount of money. These cases underscore the legal responsibilities of hotels and the potential consequences of non-compliance.

Since then, other hotels and hotel chains have been implicated in lawsuits related to human trafficking. The defendants include hotel management companies, property owners, and facilities service companies, reflecting the highly diversified supply chain of the hospitality sector. This complexity underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to combatting human trafficking. A sample of other hotels or hotel chains implicated in human trafficking cases include the following:



### *Economy Inn*

A human trafficking survivor who was between the ages of 14 and 17 filed a lawsuit against Economy Inn in 2022. According to court documents, the survivor stayed in the hotel for over a month at a time. The management of the hotel would notify the trafficker if law enforcement were in the area and if he should move her down the street to another hotel years. The trafficker would pay for the rooms in cash, and while the survivor stayed there, staff were never allowed into the rooms. The court found that the hotel failed to uphold its duty to care for its guests and profited from the illicit activity. The woman survivor was awarded approximately \$25 million.

### *Venetian in Las Vegas Named in Trafficking Lawsuit*

A woman alleges that she was repeatedly taken to several hotels owned by Aria Resort & Casino, Wynn Las Vegas, The Venetian Las Vegas, and New York-New York and coerced into prostitution by a trafficker in 2014. This young woman, who was under 18 at the time, says she showed visible signs of abuse and exploitation, including malnutrition, bruises, and injuries, while at these hotels. Despite these signs, the hotel staff did not ask questions, intervene, or report the situation to the authorities. Her lawsuit argues that the hotels' failure to implement and enforce anti-trafficking policies and procedures and their failure to adequately train staff on recognizing the signs of sex trafficking contributed to the plaintiff's continued victimization.



# Advocacy

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## Wyndham Hotels and Resorts

Wyndham Hotels and Resorts is the largest hotel chain in the U.S., which also operates Super 8, Days Inn, and La Quinta and has been named in several lawsuits. The allegations against these establishments range from negligence in preventing trafficking to active facilitation of such activities.

From 2006 to 2011, in San Diego, [California members of the Crips gang ran a child sex trafficking ring](#) through various hotels.

Two of the properties on which the trafficking took place both belong to the Wyndham group, with the staff of one of the hotels assisting in the soliciting of children. [Travelodge by Wyndham](#) staff allowed the gang to use the hotel computer to post online ads advertising sex with minors and would rent them rooms for higher rates and pocket the difference.

In [May 2022](#), a man was arrested for allegedly forcing fifteen women to sell sex at a Days Inn and a Hawthorn Suites, another Wyndham brand, in Connecticut and eventually found guilty of promoting prostitution, while two people in Kentucky were charged with trafficking out of a Ramada Inn, also a part of Wyndham's portfolio.

## Motel Six

One plaintiff in a lawsuit alleged traffickers rented rooms to imprison and traffic her and others at certain Motel 6 locations. This occurred so often that employees at the Motel 6s would be on a first-name basis with her and her trafficker. The lawsuit contends that Motel 6 staff witnessed and observed clear signs of trafficking, such as constant foot traffic of sex buyers, impaired victims, and suspicious behavior, but failed to act.

The Motel 6 brand is owned by Blackstone, one of the world's largest investment management companies. They have endorsed certain aspects of [corporate responsibility](#), such as environmental sustainability and workplace diversity and inclusion. However, the firm has neither addressed human trafficking on its properties nor encouraged anti-trafficking procedures across its company portfolio.



## Red Roof Inn

Red Roof Inn has been implicated in several lawsuits. The company has been accused of failing to take adequate measures to prevent human trafficking in its establishments.

One of the lawsuits alleged that the staff at the hotel helped a survivor who had been in a physical altercation with her trafficker. They helped her hide behind the front desk. Once behind the desk, staff members failed to call law enforcement. They instead instructed the survivor to "wait it out" until her trafficker calmed down.

Another plaintiff details how she was trafficked across multiple Red Roof properties in states including New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and others. She alleges that the hotel staff ignored numerous red flags indicating trafficking activities, such as frequent linen changes, large numbers of used condoms, and evidence of physical abuse.

Another claims that the traffickers exploited the hotel's Wi-Fi to advertise a woman's services. Despite these glaring signs, the staff reportedly failed to take action to ensure her safety, including an incident where guests heard this poor woman's screams for help, but no police were called after a room inspection.

## Marriott

Marriott is one of the most notable cases of a hotel company facing lawsuits related to human trafficking. Despite its global reach, the company has been accused of failing to prevent human trafficking in its establishments. As of June 2024, Marriott International Inc. was facing sex trafficking claims in California that were supported by the plaintiff's allegations. The U.S. District Court in Sacramento denied Marriott's motion to dismiss the plaintiff's claims.

In May 2023, sex trafficking claims against Hilton, Marriott, and G6, brought by a plaintiff in 2022, were dismissed as the judge ruled that the plaintiff did not provide enough evidence that the hotel employees knew or should have known about the trafficking.

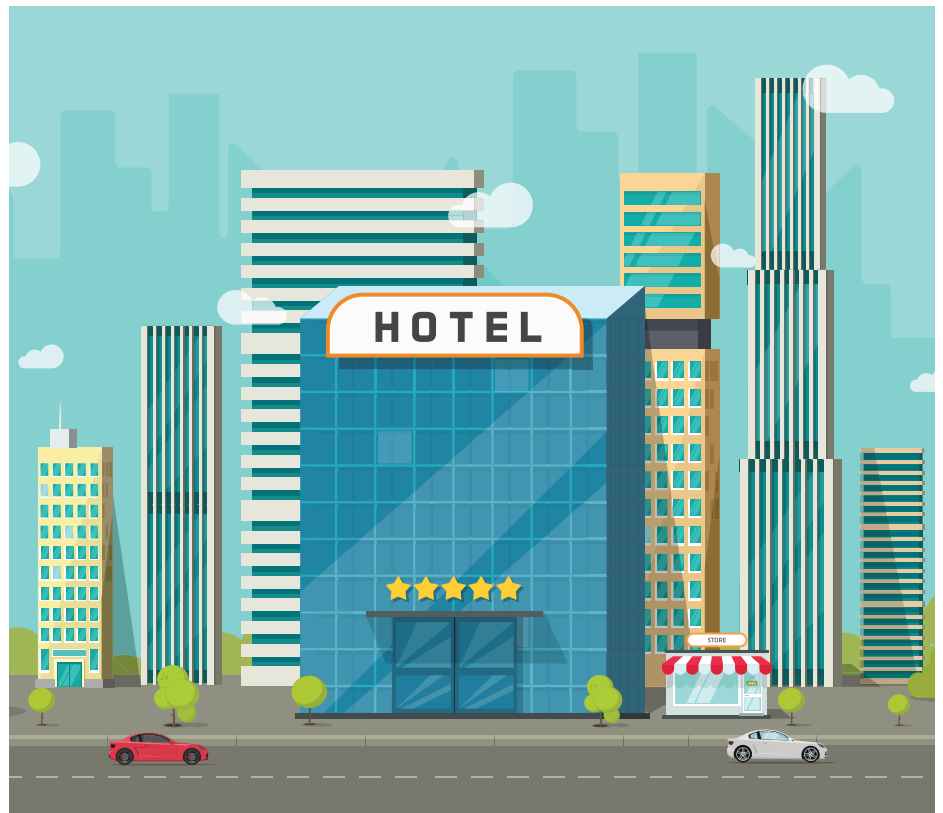
## Choice Hotels International

In March 2024, a lawsuit was filed against Choice Hotels International on behalf of a Massachusetts woman who alleges she was a victim of sex trafficking at a Rodeway Inn in Brockton, Massachusetts, from 2016 to 2018. The lawsuit claims that Choice Hotels ignored signs of trafficking and prioritized profits over protecting victims. Her traffickers connected with "johns" on Craigslist using the hotel's Wi-Fi, and she encountered the same staff members on multiple occasions and that they would have seen obvious signs of her abuse. According to the complaint, she asked staff members for help numerous times and alerted them to the alleged sex trafficking that was occurring at the hotel.

## The Impact of Human Trafficking Lawsuits on Survivors

For survivors, the pursuit of legal justice is about more than just financial compensation. It's about closure, empowerment, and the catalyst for positive changes in the hotel industry. Many hotels are now implementing reforms, such as enhanced staff training, policy establishment, and collaboration with law enforcement to combat human trafficking. These measures not only protect potential victims but also give hope for a better future.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



## The Code

**The Code**, a transformative initiative by the global anti-child trafficking organization ECPAT, is empowering the tourism industry with the necessary awareness, tools, and support to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. This mission is of utmost importance, urging businesses to express zero tolerance for sexual exploitation of children in their contracts and to provide anti-underage-trafficking training to employees.

The travel and tourism industry, as a guardian of safety, plays a pivotal role in keeping children safe. As many offenders take advantage of hotels and other tourism facilities and services to commit their crimes, we must work together to end the impunity of offenders and ensure the safety of children.

Travel and tourism companies can access tools and resources for their daily operations by becoming members of The Code. The threat of lawsuits has motivated many hotels to adopt anti-trafficking policies. However, it's not just about signing on to the Code and other policies around human trafficking, but about their effective implementation. This requires internal accountability, practical training, and well-communicated protections for vulnerable employees.

Several companies provide confidential hotlines for employees to report unethical behavior. Yet the hospitality response relies heavily on employees in potentially vulnerable positions rarely protected by whistleblower policies. Many hospitality sector employees are at the low end of the social and economic spectrum. Therefore, without adequate protections from their employers, they may wittingly and unwittingly facilitate human trafficking. It's crucial for these employees to understand their role in preventing such exploitation and to report any suspicious behavior, as they are often the first line of defense against human trafficking.

Finally, attorneys representing sex trafficking victims in civil court play a crucial role in advocating for the protection of children. Their work is instrumental in holding hotel defendants accountable for their 'willful blindness' to human trafficking. The allegations made by plaintiffs in these cases against hotels show a significant disconnect between the anti-trafficking policy publicized by the hospitality parent companies and the implementation of that policy. Legal representatives can bridge this gap and ensure that these policies are not just on paper but are effectively implemented.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## NJ Human Trafficking Hospitality Training

This video provides basic information on how to identify suspected human trafficking and/or related activity occurring on or about hotel/motel premises.

Please click [here](#) to access this video.



New Jersey Office of the Attorney General  
Division of Criminal Justice  
Human Trafficking Task Force

## Department of Homeland Security Hospitality Toolkit

This **toolkit includes** posters of the warning signs of human trafficking for hotel staff, housekeeping, maintenance, room service staff, concierges, bellmen, front desk and security staff, and food and beverage staff.



HOSPITALITY  
TOOLKIT

## What can you do?

As a traveler, you can safely help end human trafficking. Be alert to your surroundings and those you meet in the hall, elevator and elsewhere in the hotel.

- Don't look away; observe as much as possible; remember location, clothing, descriptions, how many people, the time and any names used
- Do not confront the child or adult
- Discreetly alert authorities or security personnel near you

## Preventive Measures

### Policy and Training Reforms in Hospitality

Amidst the lawsuits and public scrutiny, hotel companies have taken a proactive stance to eradicate human trafficking. They have ramped up staff training and introduced new or revised processes to report trafficking concerns. This proactive approach, both domestically and internationally, is a reassuring sign of the industry's commitment to combatting this issue.

Included in their [No Room for Trafficking campaign](#), The American Hotel & Lodging Association has developed a five-step action plan for its members:

- Training staff on what to look for and how to respond
- Displaying human trafficking indicator signage
- Establishing a companywide policy
- Ongoing coordination with law enforcement
- Sharing success stories and best practices

Hilton, an international hotel brand, has established [Travel with Purpose Goals](#) to achieve by 2030.

### International Efforts

[The Combat Human Trafficking Toolkit](#) developed by Prof. Brookes and colleagues includes measures that can be taken at three levels of management. The toolkit was a key output from a 2-year research project funded with the support of the European Commission. A multi-disciplinary team of researchers from Oxford Brookes University, the University of West London in the UK, the Lapland University of Applied Sciences in Finland, and the Ratiu Foundation for Democracy in Romania conducted the research, offering hope through their international collaboration.

## TraffickCam

TraffickCam is a free app that enables users to take photos of their hotel rooms when they travel and upload them to a database to help fight sex trafficking. Traffickers often rent hotel rooms and post online ads that include pictures of the victims posed in the hotel room. Law enforcement working on human trafficking prevention can search the database and match the images of the victims with other photos taken by TraffickCam users in the exact location. Law enforcement can then know where to look.

The purpose of TraffickCam is to create a database of hotel room images that an investigator can efficiently search to find other images that were taken in the same location as an image that is part of an investigation. These photographs are used as evidence that can be used to prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes.

TraffickCam is available at the App Store and Google Play for iPhones, iPads, and Android devices. Since its launch in 2016 by the Exchange Initiative, users have submitted around 600,000 photos, and the database now includes 12 million images of about 500,000 hotels worldwide. The FBI agrees that the app could revolutionize how they conduct their investigations, with a success rate of 85%.





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