

## Human trafficking arrests indicate ?larger issue?



**By Jeff Doner**

After a near-two month investigation labeled ?Project Home for Christmas,? York Regional Police Drugs and Vice Unit used a press conference last week to announce details of the initiative that led to the discovery of 31 girls and women who were working at hotels and condos in the area.

?Eradicating human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children remain the priority of the York Regional Police,? said Insp. Keith Merith. ?Focus of our enforcement in the area is victim based because we realized that people who are committing sexual acts for money are often the victims of crimes themselves through the violence, the threats of violence, the trickery and coercion.?

Police said of the 31 girls and women interviewed, nearly 30 per cent were under the age of 18 and that the average age of when they entered the industry was 14.

?We have seen a rise in the prostitution of women in the Region of York and we would like to send a clear message that recent changes in prostitution legislation do not relate to juveniles or those involved in sex trade industry against their will,? Merith said. ?York Regional Police have realized that in order to fully assist the victims of human trafficking, we need to assist in providing support and alternate opportunities in life for these young people, some of them who have been brave enough to come forward.?

Police said these charges against the accused are not necessarily connected to the 31 women found in Project Home for Christmas, but Detective Sergeant Casey said it is indicative of a much larger issue in the area.

?To say that there's an actual increase could in part be to the fact that our team is focused at helping younger, vulnerable and under aged individuals in the sex trade,? he said. ?It basically means that we're digging deeper into what's going on out there and this is what we're finding.

?There's one end of it where we're doing our best to assist victims of crime either before the fact or even after the fact and we also have the other side where we are out there locating the accused, putting them before the courts and hopefully putting them in jail.?

Police believe there are likely more victims out there and are asking anyone with more information to contact the York Regional Police Drugs and Vice Unit immediately.