

# EASTERN SHORE HT TASK FORCE

 ESHTTFMARYLAND



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## Task Force Spotlight

We are thrilled to revitalize the Eastern Shore Human Trafficking Task Force. We invite you to explore the inaugural edition of our quarterly newsletter, designed to share information and foster collaboration.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- ✳ **Grooming**  
July 23, 2026  
Opine & Dine: Summer Webinar Series
- ✳ **World Trafficking In Persons Day**  
July 30th 2026  
World Trafficking in Persons Day
- ✳ **Child Sex Trafficking & CSAM**  
July 30th 2026  
Opine & Dine: Summer Webinar Series
- ✳ **Labor Trafficking**  
July 7th 2026  
Opine & Dine: Summer Webinar Series



## 2026 FIFA World Cup: What it Means for Our Region

The 2026 FIFA World Cup runs from June 11 through July 19, spanning 16 cities across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Expected to draw an estimated 10 million visitors to U.S. venues alone, it is shaping up to be the largest sporting event in history. For most people, that means excitement and celebration. For those of us in the anti-trafficking field, it also means one of the most significant windows of vulnerability we have seen in years — and it is closer to home than many realize.

The Eastern Shore does not have a World Cup stadium, but geography tells a different story. Philadelphia is an official host city, and New York and New Jersey are both within easy reach of the DC-Maryland region. The Eastern Shore sits directly along the Route 50 and I-95 corridors connecting the Mid-Atlantic to both. Hotels, motels, and short-term rentals throughout Eastern Shore counties will likely see increased demand as visitors overflow from more expensive urban markets — and that overflow is exactly the kind of opportunity traffickers look for. Unfamiliar guests, high turnover, cash transactions, and limited scrutiny are the conditions they depend on.

Federal authorities are already sounding the alarm. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network issued a formal notice warning that the surge in visitors creates concentrated demand for both licit and illicit services, and that individuals near host cities may be vulnerable to sex or labor trafficking by those seeking to exploit the surge in economic activity. Law enforcement in New Jersey — another host state — has been preparing for three years, planning to deploy 1,200 troopers at various World Cup events to combat trafficking, citing the region's highway corridors, international airports, and hospitality economy as factors that make it perpetually vulnerable. That description fits the Eastern Shore as well as it fits New Jersey.

Traffickers understand how major events work. They move victims across county and state lines to follow demand, place people in roadside motels along commercial corridors, and use the noise and anonymity of large crowds to operate in ways that would attract attention under ordinary circumstances. Combined with the recent Thai Spa investigation right here in Salisbury, this summer is a critical moment for our region to stay alert. If you work in hospitality, healthcare, or transportation — or simply interact with the public — now is the time to refresh your awareness of the warning signs. A guest who seems controlled, someone who will not speak freely, an unusual pattern of room activity: trust that instinct and make the call. The National Human Trafficking Hotline is available 24 hours a day at 1-888-373-7888, or text HELP to 233733. You do not need a lot of resources. You just need to act.

## MDHTTF's FREE Summer Webinar Series!

The Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force's Public Awareness Subcommittee is excited to bring you Opine & Dine this summer! This is a free 14-session virtual panel series designed for parents, caregivers, educators, and community members to be equipped to keep our kids and our communities safer.

**Every Tuesday evening from June 16 through September 15, 6:00–7:30 PM**, we're bringing Maryland's top experts together to talk about the things that matter most: human trafficking, grooming, exploitation, crisis response, legal protections, the dark web, AI, and the resources available right here in Maryland to combat these crimes.

Every session includes 30 minutes of live Q&A. Every session is recorded and uploaded to our YouTube channel — free, forever!



**REGISTER NOW!**

## Nihilistic Violence Extremism and Online Grooming

Most people think of human trafficking as something physical. What is emerging online does not always fit that picture, but causes equal devastation. Nihilistic Violent Extremism — NVE — is one of the fastest-growing threats to children in the country today. NVEs are motivated primarily by a hatred of society and a desire to bring about its collapse through the exploitation of vulnerable populations, and those populations are overwhelmingly children. The FBI has formally designated these networks as terrorist organizations and recorded a 300% increase in NVE-related cases in a single year, with over 250 active investigations spanning all 55 FBI field offices. The most prominent network, known as "764," targets vulnerable minors through social media, grooming them before extorting them into producing sexual content, self-mutilation, and acts of violence through blackmail and psychological manipulation. The coercion, the sexual exploitation, the ongoing control — these are the hallmarks of trafficking, even when no one physically moves the child anywhere.

This is not a distant threat. In March 2026, a Maryland man pleaded guilty to federal child sexual abuse charges after being identified as a 764 network member. On the Eastern Shore, where youth vulnerability, rural isolation, and high rates of online activity intersect, these networks have every condition they look for. The warning signs are ones we already know — a teenager who becomes suddenly withdrawn, secretive about their phone, has unexplained marks on their body, or develops an intense online friendship that consumes them. If something does not feel right, say something. Contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at [CyberTipline.org](https://CyberTipline.org) or 1-800-843-5678. These networks depend on silence. Your report may be the one that breaks it.

## Summer Work Travel Students Arrive for the Season!

Every summer, thousands of international college students arrive in Ocean City on J-1 Summer Work Travel visas, drawn by the promise of cultural exchange and seasonal employment. Ocean City is one of the top destinations in the country for J-1 participants, and the local hospitality economy depends heavily on this workforce. But the program carries serious vulnerabilities. Wage theft, retaliation, physical threats, and human trafficking are among the documented abuses J-1 workers have faced. Many arrive already indebted from recruitment fees paid in their home countries, making them far less likely to report violations for fear of losing their visa status. One former Ocean City J-1 worker put it plainly: "The sponsor agency at home promised me a cultural exchange. For many of us students, the experience feels more like exploitation." If you work in hospitality or encounter a J-1 worker this summer who seems controlled, fearful, or unable to speak freely — take it seriously. Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.



**Don't forget to  
complete the  
directory form!**



## Salisbury Spa Investigated

This inter-agency response reflects a growing recognition that human trafficking investigations require more than a single department acting alone. The Maryland Criminal Intelligence Network provided direct support, with grant funding and strategic coordination supplied by the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy — an infrastructure specifically designed to identify, disrupt, and dismantle criminal organizations across the state.

The Route 13 corridor where Thai Spa operated is not an isolated location. It is a heavily trafficked commercial strip that sees thousands of vehicles daily, connecting Wicomico County to Delaware to the north and the rest of the Shore to the south. Illicit massage businesses deliberately locate along corridors like this — visible enough to attract customers, transient enough to avoid scrutiny. What looks ordinary from the outside can hide serious exploitation within.

It is important to remember that the individuals found inside businesses like this are often victims, not criminals. Many are foreign nationals with limited English, no control over their identification documents, and significant debt to those who brought them here. They may not recognize themselves as trafficking victims or feel safe asking for help. A trauma-informed, survivor-centered response from law enforcement and service providers is essential.

The investigation remains ongoing. Anyone with information regarding similar activity is asked to contact the Salisbury Police Department at (410) 548-3165. Anonymous tips can also be submitted through Crime Solvers at (410) 548-1776.



## Legislative Update: Human Trafficking Related Laws Passed in Maryland's 2026 Session

The 2026 Maryland legislative session brought meaningful progress in the fight against human trafficking. Four new laws strengthen identification, intervention, accountability, and victim protection across multiple sectors – from health care and transportation to massage therapy and public benefits.

Together, these laws reflect a growing recognition that combating human trafficking requires action across multiple systems. They create more points of identification, stronger protections for survivors, and clearer paths to accountability for exploiters.

**MORE INFO**



### Training for Health Care Professionals (HB771)

Licensed health care providers will now be required to complete training on recognizing and responding to human trafficking. Because many survivors interact with hospitals and medical providers while being exploited, this law equips providers to identify warning signs, respond in a trauma-informed way, and connect patients to support and services.



### Human Trafficking Training for Transportation Drivers (HB829/SB473)

Rideshare, taxi, and limousine drivers will now receive human trafficking awareness training. The law also provides liability protection for drivers who report suspected trafficking in good faith. Since transportation is commonly used in trafficking situations, this expands opportunities for early identification and intervention.



### Massage Therapy Advertising Protections (HB975/SB492)

New advertising requirements will require massage therapy businesses to clearly identify licensed practitioners and prohibit sexually explicit advertising. This increases transparency, helps regulators identify illegal operations, and works to reduce exploitative businesses potentially linked to trafficking.



### Benefits Exploitation Law (HB126/SB140)

Maryland created a new felony offense for "benefits exploitation," addressing situations where traffickers force or manipulate individuals into obtaining public benefits for the trafficker's financial gain. The law holds exploiters accountable while recognizing that survivors are often acting under coercion or control.

