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Joint effort against human trafficking conducted in San Rafael

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SAN RAFAEL -- San Rafael and Central Marin police and the Marin County Sheriff's Office conducted three joint prostitution-related operations Friday to promote awareness about human trafficking.

Five San Rafael men were cited for soliciting prostitution from an undercover officer posing as a sex worker in the Canal area of San Rafael, San Rafael police Sgt. Scott Eberle said.

Police officers and deputies also responded to advertisements on escort service websites and set up dates to meet women working as prostitutes.

Four women between 18 and 24 years old were contacted and offered services to help them leave the human trafficking trade. The women denied working as prostitutes and declined the services offered to them, Eberle said.

In a third operation, officers posted three decoy advertisements in the "Women Seeking Men" section of an adult dating internet escort site.

The Alameda County District Attorney's Office's Human Exploitation and Trafficking Watch Program and San Rafael police generated automated replies to text messages sent to each decoy advertisement. "Buyers" who called or texted the advertisement instantly received a text stating their phone number was now recorded with the San Rafael Police Department.

The text included an internet link containing information on how illegal human trafficking thrives because of the demand.

During a 10-hour period, 365 buyers contacted the advertisements; 150 of them contacted multiple advertisements, 59 buyers texted multiple ads and 91 buyers called multiple ads.

Contacting multiple ads is a sign of high-frequency purchasing at a rate of 75 times a year, Eberle said.

The focus of the proactive, joint operation was to raise awareness of human trafficking and educate "Johns" about their conduct, Eberle said.