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## **Assessment #3**

# **Technology and Human Trafficking**

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# Technology and Human Trafficking

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## Executive Summary

Human traffickers worldwide use technology to recruit, exploit, and monitor their victims. They lure victims in Internet chats and forums, post online recruitment and classified advertisements, and use sophisticated anonymity software to cloak their identities. The victims are men, women, children, transgender and non-conforming individuals who are trafficked for sex and forced labor. They are foreign nationals and United States citizens/residents.

There are numerous definitions of “human trafficking”, but the [Palermo Protocol definition](#) is the worldwide standard. The protocol—also known as the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children—supplements the 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and has been ratified by 167 nations, including the United States. It contains three elements—the act of trafficking, the means of trafficking, and the purpose of trafficking.

The act of trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons. The means of trafficking is defined as the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim. The purpose of trafficking is defined as exploitation. This includes, at a minimum, sexual exploitation, including the exploitation of the prostitution of others, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs. Exact numbers are challenging, but a quick glance at the caseload of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which has the largest victim assistance caseload, shows that IOM assisted nearly [7,000](#) human trafficking victims in 115 nations during 2015. The vast majority of victims—74 percent—were trafficked for forced labor or services, and, perhaps contrary to expectations—more than half—55.3 percent—were male.

In the United States, the leading anti-trafficking organization is Polaris Project. The non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) runs the United States’ National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) crisis and tip reporting hotline and the *BeFree* text line. Polaris identified [5,544](#) potential trafficking cases in 2015—85 percent were sex trafficking cases and 89 percent were female victims. Polaris Project was able to identify and assist victims, and disrupt trafficking with the help of Silicon Valley technology.

NHTRC specialists utilize an easy-to-use dashboard that lets them quickly locate the most proximate resources for victims, access 150 data variables, and triage information to law enforcement. All data is collected through the sophisticated Salesforce software system “Freedom Force”, which syncs nightly with Palantir data analysis software that analyzes aggregated data and uncovers human trafficking trends. The analysis platform maps trafficking cases and trafficking networks, and can even identify a travel route traffickers are using. Not only does this allow NHTRC to immediately connect victims to resources, it also enables Polaris to pass along critical insights to law enforcement and policymakers, helping to address the issue on multiple levels.

## Introduction

Last year, in what seemed like science fiction, emergency room medical professionals, at a hospital not identified to protect patient information and safety, encountered a patient who was adamant her trafficker had tagged her with a [monitoring chip](#). After some skepticism, the medical staff discovered that, indeed, imbedded in the woman's side was a tiny radio-frequency identification chip—the same type of microchip used to tag pets.

The hospital staff was dumbfounded, but this discovery would not have been shocking to anti-trafficking experts. Technology is friend and foe to the anti-trafficking effort. It is where traffickers lurk, target, and monitor their victims. Traffickers use the Internet to recruit victims through employment opportunity posts, and as Internet use becomes increasingly commonplace, so too does its use for recruitment. In Poland, the anti-trafficking NGO La Strada found that even nearly a decade ago 90 percent of Poles who found jobs abroad did so through the Internet. The NGO estimated that 30 percent of the trafficking victims it served were recruited this way.<sup>1</sup>

Technology is not just used in monitoring and recruitment, but also to sell the sexual services of trafficking victims. This is primarily done through online classified websites. The site most used for doing so—at least since Craigslist closed its adult services section in 2010—is the classified ad website, *Backpage.com*. Yiota G. Souras of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), [testified](#) before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, on November 19, 2015, that more than 71 percent of suspected child trafficking reports submitted by the public to the NCMEC's [CyberTipline](#) involve Backpage.com. (This does not include reports Backpage makes to the CyberTipline.)<sup>2</sup>

In March 2016, the U.S. Senate unanimously [voted](#) to hold Backpage.com in civil contempt of Congress<sup>3</sup> after the site failed to comply with an October 2015 Senate subpoena that required Backpage.com to provide, among other evidence, documents on its procedures for moderating and reviewing advertisements, metadata, and document retention. The Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations [reported](#) it found evidence that the site sometimes edits classified ad content before publication, such as deleting words and images. This likely served, said the committee, “to remove evidence of the illegality of the underlying transaction.”

In order to combat the use of classified advertisements, online recruitment/job postings, forums, and chats that facilitate modern slavery, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Defense, has developed a sophisticated search engine called [DIG \(Domain-specific Insight Graphs\) Memex](#). Unlike Google or Bing, DIG Memex plunges into Deep Web depths—web sites not indexed by

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe, 2007. *Trafficking in Human Beings: Internet Recruitment, Misuse of the Internet for the recruitment of victims of trafficking in human beings*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/trafficking\\_in\\_human\\_beings\\_internet\\_recruitment\\_1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/trafficking_in_human_beings_internet_recruitment_1.pdf). Accessed July 18, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of Yiota G. Souras, Senior Vice President & General Counsel, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, before Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (Nov. 19, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> S. Res. 377 of 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (March 17, 2016).

conventional search engines.

DIB Memex can search all online sex ads (there are more than [60 million](#)), instantaneously extracting and linking hidden information on online illicit activity, and disclose trafficking network names and numbers. In order to accomplish this, DIG Memex searches various networks, including [Tor](#), which gives users web anonymity through [onion routing](#), an advanced form of proxy routing, and was created by the Naval Research Laboratory. (Interestingly, DARPA actually contributes financially to Tor, and several Tor Project developers are working on DIG Memex.)

The search engine also digs through [Freenet](#), which allows users to anonymously share files, chat on forums, and use [Darknet](#) mode, as well as [I2P](#), which creates an anonymous network within a network.

Manhattan was one of the first cities to deploy DIG Memex, which already has a database packed with [tens of millions](#) of web pages and grows by 5,000 pages per hour. The curated counter trafficking domain index now includes sex trafficking and [forced labor](#), after initially focusing only on the former. Focusing on forced labor seems to be an issue across the board when it comes to combating human trafficking. It appears the technology world has not yet figured out how to best hone in on labor indicators. The small business [IST Research](#), which [works on](#) Memex, is trying to figure it out. Using its [Pulse](#) information sharing and analysis platform, IST Research is monitoring the supply chain, collating passive Internet data on the Deep Web to find unscrupulous recruitment networks, and determining the best communication method to reach victims and produce active engagement.

As technology becomes more sophisticated, according to Jennifer Kimball, Polaris Director of Data Analysis, so too do traffickers in finding ways to use it to help them recruit victims, sell victims, and hide from authorities. At the same time, says Kimball, technology is one of the best means for victims to reach out for help. For example, a trafficker may frequently monitor a victim's phone but then not examine his/her social media accounts. "Sometimes traffickers heavily monitor Facebook and it is not a safe way for a victim to communicate," says Kimball. "In other cases Facebook is the one space traffickers do not control and victims are able to reach out to family for help or to post on the victim's wall. It is important that there are a wide variety of options available for victims to reach help, so that they can select what is safest." It is these monitoring gaps that Polaris Project is trying to use to find and aid victims, disrupt traffickers. Through innovative partnerships with Silicon Valley, the NGO is also tracking and mapping trafficking data.

## **The National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline and the BeFree Text Line**

The concept of using technology to combat criminal activity has existed as long as the proliferation of technology. The telephone, two-way radio, and the automobile, changed the law enforcement landscape in the 20th Century. Today, the Internet, text messaging, voicemail, social media networking, and email are changing law enforcement and advocacy topography.

The challenge, of course, is that with ample funds and ready access to new technologies,

traffickers are often steps ahead. In 2012, President Obama [implored](#) all techies to join the fight against human trafficking:

*...We're turning the tables on the traffickers. Just as they are now using technology and the Internet to exploit their victims, we're going to harness technology to stop them. We're encouraging tech companies and advocates and law enforcement—and we're also challenging college students—to develop tools that our young people can use to stay safe online and on their smart phones.*<sup>4</sup>

Many private technology companies were already on board—applying their expertise and funds to disrupt and combat human trafficking. For example, in 2011, Google gave \$11.5 million in grants to support anti-trafficking technology initiatives, including those driven by Polaris Project, the International Justice Mission, and Slavery Footprint.<sup>5</sup> By this time Polaris was already a veteran in using technology to find and aid human trafficking victims, having launched the NHTRC crisis and tip reporting hotline in 2007 with specialists capable of answering calls in more than 200 languages. The 24/7 hotline receives roughly 100 calls a day from a variety of victims and survivors, concerned friends and family members, worried neighbors, and organizations wanting to know how best to serve human trafficking survivors. Overall, says Polaris Director Kimball, roughly 50 percent of the calls received are high indicators of human trafficking. The other 50 percent are considered moderate indicators, lacking the essential elements of force, fraud, or coercion. Since its inception, the multimodal hotline has received 107,982 phone calls, 6,550 web form contacts, and 7,667 emails that resulted in the identification of 25,791 human trafficking cases—26,102 victims had high indicators of human trafficking, while 27,187 had moderate indicators.

Polaris and other tech-driven anti-trafficking groups are constantly amending their approaches to include the newest popular technology. At present there is a proliferation of communication applications that are changing the technology terrain—Snapchat, WeChat, and Kakao Talk in Asia, but text messaging remains the most used smartphone feature or application. A Pew Research Center 2015 survey that measured smartphone ownership and demographics in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> revealed that 97 percent of smartphone owners used text messaging at least once during the course of the period surveyed. Younger American smartphone users (ages 18 to 29) were particularly enthusiastic text messaging users with 100 percent of those surveyed using text messaging, compared to 91 percent using social networking.

Since the NHTRC's inception, callers could reach a specialist by phone, email, and web form, but as time progressed, Kimball and her colleagues realized they needed to add texting as a means of access, not only because texting is immensely popular, but also because, for some victims, it is the safest way to contact the NHTRC. "People who are trafficked are closely monitored and may not be able to speak to someone on the phone, but they may be able to silently send a text message," says Kimball. "We did not want that to be a barrier to people reaching help. There are already enough barriers."

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<sup>4</sup> Remarks by President Obama to the Clinton Global Initiative (September 25, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Dixon H.B. Jr., Human Trafficking and the Internet\* (\*and Other Technologies, too), *The Judges' Journal*, American Bar Association, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Smith A. and Page D., *U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015*, Pew Research Center (April 2015), [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/03/PI\\_Smartphones\\_0401151.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/03/PI_Smartphones_0401151.pdf).

In order to add texting to its artillery, Polaris collaborated with three California-based technology companies—Thorn: Digital Defenders of Children, Salesforce, and Twilio. Together they created the easy-to-remember text shortcode *BeFree* (233733). Meaning, a victim or person reaching out with a tip needs simply to send a text to *BeFree*. Twilio created the shortcode and message delivery system for the text line backend, which supports Polaris with free texting. Another company, Bridge Farm Consulting, helped link Twilio with Salesforce software, so that the text line conversations could be tracked in the NHTRC database. *BeFree* launched on March 28, 2013 and, so far, has had roughly 3,617 text conversations that led to 424 human trafficking cases.<sup>7</sup>

Communication on the text line is more demanding and generally communicates a higher level of crisis than the hotline, which makes it critical that specialists be particularly suited to texting. Generally, says Kimball, specialists are first assigned to the phone hotline, take an exam, and eventually graduate into text line support. Even so, she says, texting is not right for all specialists. “It is a more challenging communication medium for building trust, rapport, and providing emotional support, so we select staff that are strongly skilled in this area,” says Kimball.

The increased challenge is, in part, because texting does not provide the additional non-verbal cues that exist in phone communication—such as tone of voice—and there is a great deal of back and forth. This can make it more difficult for specialists to obtain information. Furthermore, because victims’ phones are highly monitored, it can be difficult for specialists to help callers come up with a safety plan via text message. On the other hand, the strong benefit of texting is that victims may be able to text when they are unable to call, creating an opportunity for communication that did not exist. Also, some callers are simply more comfortable and feel safer texting than speaking on the phone. “Texting conversations are a lot more about providing emotional support, creating a safe space, and helping talk through options,” according to Kimball. Kimball says the *BeFree* text line typically involves multiple conversations over weeks or even months, and 23 percent of victims reach out to NHTRC through text as opposed to 11 percent by phone. “This supports our hypothesis that texting is a way that victims feel more comfortable and safe reaching out,” says Kimball.

The number of victims reaching out through the text line keeps increasing—in fact, there was a 24 percent increase in 2015. Kimball says this is because people hear about the text line through word-of-mouth from other survivors or through service providers. “Later, when they are in a bad situation, they reach out for help,” says Kimball. The vast majority—82 percent—of text cases involves female victims of domestic sex trafficking (where victims are U.S. citizens or residents). In part, Kimball says, this is because the program has targeted English-speakers in its advertisements, which likely skews what populations know to reach out to the text line. “Text messaging in other languages is very complex and it is hard enough to keep up with English lingo, let alone that of other languages,” says Kimball. “That may be why forced labor statistics for the text line are low.”

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<sup>7</sup> *BeFree Text line Statistics*, Polaris, <https://polarisproject.org/befree-text-line/stats>.

## Victim-Centered and Caller-Led Specialists

Each NHTRC case has about 150 data variables that include: the type of trafficking (labor or sex), the involved industries, victim demographics, country of origin, city and state where the victimization is taking place, location type involved—such as a residential brothel, truck stop, or bar—and information about the trafficker that, if appropriate, can be triaged to law enforcement. Sometimes the caller, Kimball says, is a mother worried about her daughter or a person concerned about her/his friend; it is often credible information, even though the specialist is not speaking directly to the victim.

In other cases, the caller may be someone worried about a domestic worker in a neighboring home who appears not to be permitted to leave the house. This type of caller often does not have a tremendous amount of information.

The hotline also gets calls from people that are not related to an active human trafficking case. For instance, a director of a domestic violence shelter, who expects to have more human trafficking victim residents, may call the hotline to learn more about how best to serve them.

The NHTRC is staffed with paid part-time and fulltime employees instead of volunteers, helping to minimize call specialist turnover and create continuity. The average full-time tenure for call specialists is two years, while part-time employees, often students, either become full-time employees or graduate and move on. Shift changes are carefully orchestrated and staggered, says Kimball, and shift supervisors are up-to-date on all active, ongoing cases. Specialists also leave case notes that are shared so that incoming call specialists have access to all case details.

Polaris does not take the role of call specialist lightly. Callers rarely self-identify as trafficking victims and NHTRC call specialists are trained to refer to the caller as he/she identifies himself/herself. They are victim-centered, caller-led, and do not follow role dialog. Instead, call specialists offer options customized to the caller's particular situation, questions, or concerns.

For example, if a caller wants to know how to report a tip, the specialist talks him/her through the various channels he/she can report information. If the caller is unsure what to do, the specialist will present options. It is critical, says Kimball, that the experience is as empowering and caller-led as possible because the trafficking experience for victims is one without choice. "It is really important that we are not telling callers what to do, but instead, that we are helping him/her think through what's right for him/her and what options are available," says Kimball. "That is going to be different for someone looking to get out of a dangerous situation versus a trucker who has just seen a child go door-to-door soliciting people for sex. The options are different and the most likely outcome is different."

One concern, and sometimes a deterrent, for callers is whether reporting can be done anonymously. The answer to that concern is that reporting can be anonymous. Another frequent apprehension is whether the contact with NHTRC will be triaged to law enforcement. The reality is that there are only a few instances where NHTRC is mandated to contact law enforcement—if the call/text involves a minor (under 18 years old), if there is immediate danger (e.g. the trafficker has threatened the victim or is pursuing the victim to do harm), or if the caller is a risk to himself/herself (e.g. suicidal).

Aside from those cases, call specialists discuss all possible options with callers/texters and only triage to law enforcement if the caller/texter wants law enforcement involved. “Many victims are seeking immediate redress and assistance from law enforcement,” says Kimball. “Other victims, many of whom have been forced to commit crimes during their trafficking experience (e.g. immigration violation or prostitution), may be fearful and not ready to report to law enforcement.” It is vital, she says, for call specialists to first connect the victim with services so that he/she can be in a stable situation and then determine for himself/herself whether to report. When call/text information is triaged to law enforcement, NHTRC specialists do so carefully, and to law enforcement personnel that have been trained on how to recognize the signs of human trafficking and how to work with survivors.

## NHTRC Data Tracking and Analysis Software

Soon after launching the hotline, Polaris Project began tracking and collecting data on how it could best respond to NHTRC callers. Each call resulted in an individual case report. However, because each report was isolated, detecting commonalities was incredibly challenging.

In 2008, Polaris collaborated with Salesforce to create a database that collects information from callers and service providers. Even though the software is primarily a tool for companies to track sales pipelines, Salesforce makes it available to NGOs at no cost. Because the out-of-the-box software system is not inherently designed to track human trafficking cases, Salesforce modified the software to fit Polaris’ specific needs.

Polaris, in turn, shared the modified system with other anti-trafficking organizations across the globe. Those that have adopted the modified system—called *Freedom Force*—include A21 in Bulgaria, Greece, and South Africa; LaStrada in the Czech Republic; and Liberty Asia in Thailand. The adopting group installs the Salesforce software and Polaris imports its custom code. “The organization then has our data infrastructure and we send a team to train them on how to use the system,” said Kimball. “We are not linked into their system, so each organization is able to maintain its database confidentially.” However, Kimball says nations and organizations that use the modified system are able share data, if they want. For example, Greece and Bulgaria (an origin nation for many of Greece’s trafficking victims) have the *Freedom Force* data system. The result, says Kimball, is that officials are better able to track trafficking flows between the two nations.

Polaris has not yet shared the modified system software with U.S. anti-trafficking groups, although Kimball affirms they would like to do so. Initially, Polaris received a [Force for Change](#) grant from Salesforce to package and deploy the modified system. At present, Polaris does not have specific grant funding, so the additional expansion has been more challenging to implement, even though Kimball believes it to be crucial. “It is important for hotlines to thoroughly collect data, but many organizations donot have the resources to build their own databases.”

Even with the comprehensive *Freedom Force* data system, NHTRC was not able initially to conduct a thorough data analysis. Call specialists had to toggle between Google Maps, to determine the caller’s exact location, and Microsoft Word documents with 215 protocols, demographics, and lengthy lists. These lists included information on proximate resources—local law enforcement agencies, shelters, mental health services, and legal services—that

helped call specialists determine the best (and closest) options for callers.

In 2012, Polaris collaborated with data analysis and visualization platform giant, Palantir Technologies, syncing roughly 95,000 individual case reports and streamlining location, demographics, protocols, and resources into an easy-to-use dashboard for call specialists. The software goes far beyond just an easy interface, it maps trafficking cases, trafficker networks, and analyzes trends—such as calls about the same recruitment company and/or traffickers, or multiple victims using the same phone number to contact the NHTRC.

The data collected by Salesforce syncs with [Palantir software](#) every night, allowing the latter to constantly update and aggregate NHTRC data. Since adding Palantir, Polaris has been able to quickly (and as close to real time as possible) discover recent trends and lesser-known trafficking types. For instance, the analysis tool uncovered an uptick in door-to-door magazine sales crew trafficking cases. These highly mobile units typically traffic U.S. citizens and, because they commonly cross state lines, are difficult to monitor and stop. By the time law enforcement can respond, victims have already been moved to another location. Thanks to Palantir, Polaris is now able to map traveling sales crews' movements and alert law enforcement to their routes. The data also triggers the NGO to report the data to federal law enforcement when trafficking crosses state lines.

Another trend the NHTRC data reveals is an increase in cases where traffickers force girls and women to solicit sex at truck stops, forcing victims go truck-to-truck. This has prompted Polaris to work with the organization [Truckers Against Trafficking](#) (TAT) in order to increase awareness and determine best methods for intervention. The non-profit trucking organization promotes the NHTRC hotline, trains truckers to identify trafficking and help trafficking plazas increase security, increase staff training, and prioritize resources to high risk locations.

TAT has even developed an Android [application](#) to help those in the travel plaza industry identify and combat domestic sex trafficking. The application cannot be used to directly report potential cases of trafficking, but it provides essential information, such as trafficking red flags, information to collect, questions to ask victims, what law enforcement needs to open an investigation, and contact information for the NHTRC hotline.

In a recent study, not all callers identified how they found out about the NHTRC, but the largest number of those who did—3,693 callers—stated they found the NGO through the Internet (23.8 percent). This was closely followed by referral (20.4 percent), and by word-of-mouth (12.5 percent).

Seventy-five percent of victims identified through the hotline in 2015 were trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. This is, in part, because it is easier for people to identify sex trafficking cases. “A red flag is already raised for illicit activities,” says Kimball. “It is harder for people to recognize trafficking in legitimate businesses because they are not aware of what the red flags look like.”

There is greater public awareness of sex trafficking than forced labor, but as awareness increases so, too, theoretically, should the number of identified forced labor cases. While the number of forced labor victims identified through calls to the NHTRC has risen since the 622 identified in 2012, identification of the largest number of forced labor victims was in 2013 (871 victims), with the number decreasing each year since. Over the past four years,

says Kimball, the most commonly identified form of forced labor through the NHTRC has been forced domestic work, due to an increased public awareness of those cases.

An important critical factor in reaching victims and identifying human trafficking cases is whether the trafficking is openly visible. The second most identified forced labor victims are individuals in traveling forced sales crews, who go door-to-door in mostly residential neighborhoods. This has been true for each of the past five years (including, to date, in 2016), except for 2015 when there were more victims identified in agricultural/farm labor.

The 2015 NHTRC hotline [data breakdown](#) illustrates that the largest number of callers—5,833—were community members, 10.6 percent more than the 3,506 victim callers. This is not considered surprising, as traffickers closely monitor their victims. What is noteworthy is the continual increase in victim callers—1,321 in 2012, 2,158 in 2013, 2,712 in 2014, and 3,506 in 2015. This increase is attributed, in large part, to Palantir software data analysis improving NHTRC’s outreach by making it more targeted.

Initially, says Kimball, the NGO’s outreach focused on general community awareness. However, over the years, the organization has gotten better at determining where victims will likely see or hear information on how to report—such as advertisements in Spanish on specific radio stations to reach farm workers or at bus shelters to reach U.S. victims of sex trafficking. “We have been able to analyze the data we collect to see where survivors encounter information, and how we can get them out of the situation to speak to someone,” says Kimball. “It is such a diverse crime—what speaks to an adult women from the Philippines in domestic servitude in the U.S. is different than what will reach a 14-year-old sex trafficking victim. We need to be very targeted about where we put advertising messages and what the messages contain.”

Polaris’ partnerships with Silicon Valley have not just improved the NGOs outreach—assistance to victims and disruption to traffickers—the data collected and analyzed provide essential insights that are discussed with a wide variety of actors and key-decision makers who can make changes to policy, strategy, and protocol. Among groups Polaris meets with to discuss these insights are the U.S. Government Accountability Office (Polaris raised concern over the temporary work visa program), legislative advocates (so they have the information they need when going to the hill and speaking with legislators), and banks or financial institutions to discuss how money is flowing. Polaris also shares insights with law enforcement and attorney generals so that they know the key nodes of recent trafficking structures. “The goal is to give the information they need to amend strategies, if needed, and potential pressure points, based on how traffickers operate and who has the power to exert that pressure,” says Kimball.

## Conclusion

Technology has allowed Polaris to address the trafficking issue holistically and on multiple critical levels. The NGO will continue to partner with Silicon Valley to keep up with the newest innovations and apply them to combat the horrific epidemic of human trafficking.