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Contact: Lowell Hochhalter at 406.529.6914

## **LIFEGUARD GROUP OF MISSOULA LAUNCHES NEW MONTANA HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE**

MISSOULA, MT—The Lifeguard Group of Missoula is spearheading efforts to reduce human trafficking in Montana. Working with regional task forces, law enforcement agencies, and organizations throughout the state, the nonprofit is launching a human trafficking hotline Monday, November 16.

A coordinated state effort will enable partners to significantly shorten the response time to aid those in need. According to Lowell Hochhalter, executive director of the Lifeguard Group, “Weak communication channels can lead to victims of human trafficking in Montana falling through the cracks, restricting them from receiving help and diminishing the available data that our state needs to effectively fight human trafficking.”

The hotline will be available to victims by text, phone, and a web portal. Hochhalter says, “It will serve as an immediate and central access point for victims of human trafficking to receive services and connect with a trained volunteer who can assist in developing a safety plan to exit the situation.”

The system will serve 6,000 people in Montana, of an estimated 2 million in the U.S. who are exploited annually. Using iCarol crisis referral and helpline software, funded by the Gianforte Family Foundation, volunteers will collect and analyze data that can be shared statewide. Lifeguard trained 129 volunteers this year, collaborating with the state’s task forces, to launch the 24/7 hotline.

Lifeguard’s partners include:

- North Central Montana Human Trafficking & MMIP Task Force, Great Falls
- Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force
- Missoula Human Trafficking Task Force
- Park County Human Trafficking Task Force of Montana
- Gallatin County Human Trafficking Task Force

Peggy Ronning, co-founder of the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force, adds a sobering perspective, “Modern-day slavery happens right here in Montana. Some recent reports have ranked Montana fourth per capita in terms of the size of our human trafficking problem.”

U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo speaks to the challenge in the June 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: “While urgency has always marked the fight against human trafficking, the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have magnified the need for all stakeholders to work together in the fight more than ever....Instability and lack of access to critical services caused by the pandemic mean that the number of people vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers is rapidly growing.”

The North Central Montana Human Trafficking & MMIP Task Force, Great Falls, provided its hotline number, 1-833-406-STOP, to support the effort.

The Lifeguard Group and regional task forces are seeking added volunteers to help staff the hotline. Lifeguard also actively conducts searches to rescue human trafficking victims and missing persons. For more information, contact Hochhalter at 406.529.6914.