‘No calls about this’ in Liberal, police say

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Child trafficking happens in communities across America, as national news covered the dramatic rescue of more than 100 children in an FBI operation last week. Perhaps it was stories of “Operation Cross Country” that prompted concerns in Southwest Kansas, but law enforcement offices in Liberal and Dodge City say there is no reason for parents to panic.

“We’ve had absolutely no calls about this kind of thing,” said Capt. Patrick McClurg of the Liberal Police Department. “It’s a national concern, obviously, but locally, our response has to be based on information and intelligence, reasonable suspicion of criminal activity — and we haven’t had anything like that.”

Local concerns that might connect to child trafficking and prostitution issues often turn out to be individual cases of a troubled child or family, rather than a large system seeking to recruit multiple young people.

“We have runaways, just like every other community,” McClurg said, “and sometimes it is running away with a boyfriend or significant other. We haven’t had cases where someone was sold into prostitution or anything like that.”

In Dodge City, the police department issued a press release after receiving calls about two women going door-to-door in the community, selling learning materials for children. Local residents who called the police said they'd heard a rumor that the vendors were asking to meet with children who lived in the homes.

"These two subjects Carina Paju and Pille-Riin Aasa have obtained a City of Dodge City 'Handbill Distribution Permit' to go door to door starting on July 16, 2013 thru August 10, 2013. Both of these subjects are college students from Wichita," the press release said. "While they are going door-to-door, they are asking to speak to parents and not the children who may be present."

Facebook chatter had suggested such salespeople had also visited homes in smaller communities around Dodge City, causing concern.

Liberal law enforcement had not heard of any such incidents, said McClurg.

"We do encourage citizens to contact us if they notice somebody unusual in the neighborhood, going door to door," he said. "We actually encourage them to call us."

In the absence of any reported dangers, however, McClurg said it's always important for parents to re-evaluate their household and family safety policies. Years ago, children were warned not to talk to strangers, to run if a person in a vehicle slowed and beckoned them to approach the car or truck, and even to refuse to help people who claimed to be looking for a lost puppy in the park.

"All of that older-type of advice is still relevant," McClurg said. "But in addition, in this day and age, parents have to be aware of the impact of their children's Internet usage and social media."

It's not enough to warn children.

“Parents need to monitor their activities,” McClurg said, even if that means learning new technology applications. Yet he encourages parents to view the use of today’s newest gadgets with a certain amount of levity.

“It’s got some challenges, but I think back to my childhood before cell phones, when my mom was off at work and I’d get home from school,” he said. “I was off doing what I was doing, and she had no way of knowing what that was, or who I was with.”

Today, he said, fathers and mothers have an array of options with which to check up on their children.

Parents might not always understand what their kids are doing on the computer or cell phone, but the good side is that it’s actually possible to stay in touch with them or even track them with a GPS.

“Technology is good or bad,” he said. “It depends on how you use it. But the basic rule of thumb is to be a good parent and pay attention.”