



TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

EVERY YEAR, MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN all over the world are trafficked within and across borders for forced labor and sexual exploitation. Human trafficking victims endure unspeakable hardships and suffer severe psychological trauma. Victims can be found working in ordinary places, including hotels, restaurants and private residences.

According to the U.S. Department of State, approximately 800,000 victims are trafficked across international borders each year. Between 14,500 and 17,500 people are trafficked into the U.S. from Asia, Central and South America, and Eastern Europe. Domestic human trafficking within the United States is also far too common. About 20 percent of trafficking victims have been transported through Texas. The U.S. Department of Justice has named Houston and El Paso as being among the nation's "most intense trafficking jurisdictions in the country."

Even the most experienced, well-trained law enforcement officers find it difficult to differentiate between human trafficking cases and other cases. For example, a human trafficking victim who has been subjected to forced prostitution or sexual slavery is a victim

– not a prostitute who may be subject to prosecution.

Human traffickers subject victims to force, fraud or coercion in order to reap unlawful profits. The U.S. State Department estimates that 80 percent of victims are female and 50 percent are children. Victims are often "hidden in plain sight" and held under the belief they owe their captors some sort of debt, which frequently stems from their transport into the U.S. This cycle of debt bondage usually grows, as captors typically increase what the victim "owes."

Victims may also be threatened with punishment, death or injury to their families. Even if victims realize that their debts are not legally enforceable and their situations are illegal, many who are trafficked into the U.S. cannot understand or speak English – or are isolated and prevented from communicating with those who might be able to help them.

Prior to the 81st Legislative Session, the Office of the Attorney General and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) conducted a joint human trafficking study. Our report, "The Texas Response

to Human Trafficking," offers 21 recommendations that are intended to reduce human trafficking and improve services to victims, including improved outreach efforts that would better educate law enforcement personnel about identifying human trafficking.

One recommendation suggested creating a statewide human trafficking task force that would include representatives from federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, relevant state social service agencies, and interested non-governmental organizations from across the state. That recommendation was made law with the passage of House Bill 4009 by Rep. Randy Weber and Sen. Leticia Van de Putte. The legislation establishes a task force within the Office of the Attorney General that will assist with the prevention and prosecution of human trafficking crimes.

House Bill 4009 also creates an assistance program within HHSC for human trafficking victims. The new law provides for a searchable database of programs available to domestic victims and a grant program that will provide direct assistance to victims. In an effort to increase awareness of

the available services, database and potential grant funding sources, the bill creates a training program for judges, prosecutors and law enforcement.

The Texas Legislature also passed House Bill 533, which allows a human trafficking victim to hold their captor liable in a civil court for damages arising from involuntary servitude. The new law is designed to help trafficking victims recoup their financial losses and allow the state to recover the costs for victim services.

Refining state human trafficking laws will give Texas law enforcement agencies more training, tools and power to recognize and battle this problem. Considering the complexity of human trafficking crimes, we all need to work together to find solutions that help victims and punish their oppressors. For a copy of the publication, "The Texas Response to Human Trafficking," please visit our agency Web site at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov. Peace officers may direct additional inquiries to Captain Greg Lucas of the Criminal Investigations Division at (512) 936-1335.