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Task Force Releases Final Report on Human Trafficking in California

By Cory Jaspersen, Speaker pro Tem Lieber's Office

Today, the California Alliance to Combat Trafficking and Slavery (CA ACTS) Task Force released its Final Report, Human Trafficking in California, with findings and recommendations to the Governor, Attorney General and Legislature.

The report, the result of nearly 18 months of work, describes the extent of this modern-day form of slavery in California, and recommends measures to strengthen the state's response. It includes recommendations to provide more powerful tools for law enforcement and prosecutors, launch aggressive steps to prevent human trafficking in California, increase public awareness, and bolster support for victims.

"Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. Although authorities have the ability to prosecute cases of trafficking and forced labor within California, more needs to be done," said Assembly Speaker pro Tempore Sally Lieber. "California is a magnet state for trafficking; we must be on the forefront of identifying and stopping these crimes as well. This report will be a blueprint for further legislation and action by law enforcement."

California is a top destination for human traffickers. Research by the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center identified 57 forced labor operations in almost a dozen cities in California, between 1998 and 2003, involving more than 500 individuals from 18 countries.

"I applaud the Task Force for their groundbreaking and thorough report, as it reaffirms the need for California to move in a direction that ensures victims are not denied of their basic human right to freedom," said Assemblywoman Fiona Ma. "By shedding light on these heinous crimes, we can bring the women and children out of the shadows and put away traffickers who lure and prey on our communities. However, it is important to realize that human trafficking is more than just a public safety issue – it's about human rights."

"California took an enormous leap forward with AB 22 by providing powerful tools to crack down on traffickers," said Kamala Harris, District Attorney of San Francisco and a member of the Task Force. "The excellent work done by the Task Force is a remarkable accomplishment growing out of that effort and, as this report shows, we can make those tools even more effective by including more training for law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting these intolerable human rights abuse cases. I look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature to strengthen California's anti-trafficking law."

Human trafficking is a hidden crime, a modern-day form of slavery. It means controlling a person through force, fraud or coercion – physical or psychological – to exploit the person for forced labor, sexual exploitation, or both. It means the deprivation of freedom and the abuse of basic human rights.

“Slavery was abolished in this nation 150 years ago,” said Nancy Matson, Chairperson of the Task Force and Director of the Attorney General’s Crime and Violence Prevention Center, “but now another form of slavery has emerged. Illicit trade in human beings deprives people, often women and children, of their freedom and exploits them for profit. We must work as diligently as our ancestors to stamp out this evil before it takes further root in our state.”

According to the federal government, after drug dealing, human trafficking is tied with the illegal arms industry as the second largest criminal industry in the world today, and it is the fastest growing. California’s extensive international border, its major harbors and airports, its powerful economy and accelerating population, its large immigrant population and its industries make it a prime target for traffickers. In addition to the horrific impact on trafficked victims, the links between human trafficking, human smuggling, drug trafficking and money laundering expand the reach of violent crimes associated with trafficking in human beings.

The California Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which was authored by Assemblywoman Lieber and took effect on January 1, 2006, directed the CA ACTS Task Force to examine California’s efforts to prevent trafficking, assist victims and prosecute traffickers, and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor, the Attorney General and the Legislature. The Task Force consists of 19 members, representing agencies and organizations mandated by the law, including law enforcement, prosecutors, the judiciary, public defenders, non-governmental organizations, health services, social services, mental health, domestic violence and sexual assault victim advocate, researchers, farm workers, immigrants’ rights groups and labor. The law charged the Attorney General’s Office with chairing and administering the work of the Task Force.

“The recommendations in this report will help provide victims of human trafficking with needed services and assistance to escape their desperate circumstances,” said Kay Buck, Executive Director of the Coalition to Abolish Trafficking & Slavery in Los Angeles, and a member of the Task Force. “This report provides a strong blueprint for training, public awareness measures and special services so that victims can escape and rebuild their lives.”

“Anyone who is still enslaved needs to know that there is hope,” said “Esperanza,” a survivor of human trafficking who escaped a sweatshop in Los Angeles in 2002. “They need to know that they can reach out and receive the precious gift of freedom, just as I did.”

As part of California’s response to help victims of human trafficking, on September 29, 2006, the state became the first in the nation to enact a law providing a “bridge” of temporary services to offer immediate assistance to victims as they await approval for federal benefits (SB 1569, Senator Kuehl, 2006). Additionally, Assemblywoman Ma sponsored a resolution proclaiming January 11 of each year as National Human Trafficking Day in California to help raise public awareness about human trafficking.

Copies of the Task Force’s final report, Human Trafficking in California, are being distributed to policy makers and leaders throughout the state who are involved in investigating and prosecuting traffickers and serving and protecting victims.

Highlights of Key Findings and Recommendations

The following issues represent those that the Task Force determined to be the most crucial in responding to human trafficking in California. A thorough discussion of all of the Task Force’s findings and recommendations are contained in its Final Report, dated October 2007.

The report is available online at www.SafeState.org/HumanTrafficking

- California should develop better mechanisms for collecting data on the nature and extent of human trafficking in this state.
- To help human trafficking victims escape, victims must trust that their immediate health, safety and housing needs will be met.
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need sufficient funds to provide services to human trafficking victims, including caseworker, shelter, legal support, health care, interpreter and other services, as well as for community outreach and measures to help victims become self sufficient.
- The perception that most human trafficking is sex trafficking must be dispelled, and other forms of forced labor recognized.
- Law enforcement, health and social services providers, labor agencies and other first responders need training on how to recognize the signs of human trafficking and assist victims; and the public should become aware of what human trafficking is and how to report it.
- California’s anti-trafficking law needs stiffer penalties for traffickers and stronger tools to prosecute those who prey on minors.
- Prosecution of traffickers is strengthened when law enforcement works with NGOs to build trust with victims – encouraging victims to come forward, report the abuse and cooperate with the investigation.
- California should have more emergency shelters and transitional housing specifically designed to meet the unique needs of human trafficking victims.
- The federal T visa immigration relief process should be examined, as it is currently too complex, cumbersome and time-consuming to meet the needs of trafficking victims.
- Victims of human trafficking should be informed of their rights under state and federal laws, in culturally appropriate messages.
- A critical strategy to end human trafficking is to address the poverty, gender discrimination and poor labor conditions in “source” countries that lead vulnerable people to undertake a risky migration into developed countries.

- California bears a moral responsibility to exert leadership, through government and business purchasing practices, to implement and monitor codes of conduct assuring fair and humane labor practices throughout their supply chain.
- Societal attitudes that perpetuate human trafficking should be examined and consciousness-raising measures should affirm that everyone in the United States is entitled to basic human rights, no matter where they came from or what their circumstances.

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