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Human trafficking targeted in Tampa forum, legislation

By Jerome R. Stockfisch

Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi speaks at the Public Safety Forum in recognition of National Crime Victims Rights Week. CLIFF McBRIDE/STAFF

TAMPA — A forum on human trafficking Thursday was scheduled to mark National Crime Victim’s Rights Week but also came at the same time as a push in Tallahassee to recognize women and girls forced into prostitution as victims rather than criminals.

The Florida Legislature in 2012 passed landmark legislation aimed at steering victims of human trafficking from juvenile jails to “safe houses” and social services that provide help.

At the urging of leaders including A. Lee Bentley III, U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Florida, and Pam Bondi, the state’s attorney general, lawmakers are attempting in the current legislative session to expand that law and plug holes where needed.

“Human trafficking takes many forms,” said Bentley, who hosted Thursday’s forum with Bondi at Keiser University in Tampa. “In order to tackle this problem, we must collaborate with our partners on all fronts – from education and prevention, to enforcement, prosecution and the recovery of victims.”

Law enforcement officers from several different agencies and social service providers heard from a survivor of sex trafficking, operators of crisis centers, a children’s advocate from Hillsborough circuit court who has conducted nearly 700 forensic interviews with minors, and federal and state prosecutors who discussed how to build human trafficking cases.
The state Department of Children and Families verified 182 victims of commercial sex trafficking in the state during fiscal year 2012-13, according to a legislative analysis of the issue.

“Human trafficking is not just a local problem, it’s a national problem, and it’s a problem that as a community we all have to work together to overcome,” said Stacie Harris, an assistant U.S. attorney. “Without our partnerships with local and federal law enforcement, as well as the NGOs (non-governmental organizations), we would not be as successful as we’ve been so far here in the middle district of Florida.”

The Florida Safe Harbor Act of 2012 allowed sexually exploited children to be treated as dependent children rather than delinquent children. It amended state law to make child prostitution the abuse of a child, rather than a criminal act by the child.

Last year, lawmakers again addressed human trafficking, passing legislation that allows victims to petition for expunction, or erasure, of any conviction for certain offenses committed as a victim of human trafficking.

The legislation was designed to protect victims from their traffickers – often, they develop a relationship with them – and ensure their cooperation to increase the chances of successful prosecution of pimps.

“It’s making a big difference,” said Aaron Hubbard, an assistant state attorney who addressed the forum. “They’re definitely going in the right direction.”

This year, at least six bills addressing human trafficking have been filed in the legislative session ending May 2.

Most are minor tweaks to the Safe Harbor Act, refining the definition of sexual abuse of a child, addressing victim privacy and access to court records, and allowing victim relocation assistance.

A sweeping committee bill is heading to the House floor after breezing out of its last committee stop Thursday on a unanimous vote. The measure establishes standards for residential treatment of sexually exploited children, creates a certification program for safe houses, requires the Department of Children and Families to create screening and assessments to serve children, requires DCF to have response protocols in place, and calls for a state study on sexual exploitation of children in Florida.

A Senate companion was also scheduled for a hearing during its only committee stop Thursday.

The House bill provides $3 million to implement the provisions of the bill. The Senate bill doesn’t include a price tag.

Meantime, Bondi said her office is working with the Legislature to establish a Statewide Council on Human Trafficking, a group she would chair and house within her office. The council would coordinate and enhance state and local law enforcement and social services responses to fight sex trafficking and support victims, she said.
“Human trafficking is a horrific crime against children, women and men,” Bondi said. “The victims of this crime are just that — victims — and they need to be treated as such, rather than as criminals. My office is committed to fighting human trafficking on every front.”

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