

# AG details legal battle against sex trafficking

## Rob McKenna speaks to Vancouver Rotary



Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna spoke to the Vancouver Rotary Club on Wednesday about the campaign he is waging at both the state and national levels to combat human trafficking.

By [Kathie Durbin](#)

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Republican Attorney General Rob McKenna visited Vancouver Wednesday, but not to discuss his upcoming campaign to succeed Democrat Chris Gregoire as Washington's governor.

Instead, McKenna was wearing a different hat as president of the National Association of Attorneys General. The Vancouver Rotary Club invited him to talk about the campaign he is waging at both the state and national levels to combat human trafficking.

It's been a priority for McKenna for years. In 2008, he invited former U.S. Rep. Linda Smith of Vancouver to come to Olympia and brief lawmakers about Washington's own problem with sex trafficking of teenagers. Smith is the founder of Vancouver-based Shared Hope International, an organization that battles cross-border sex trafficking internationally as well prostitution rings close to home.

"We're a bit of a hot spot for human trafficking," McKenna told the Rotary audience of 130. He recalled a

Pierce County official describing to him how five or six young girls had been forced into prostitution by Tacoma street gangs. “That really drove home the issue,” he said.

Human trafficking — for prostitution or other forced labor — is a huge problem both domestically and internationally, McKenna said. An estimated 14 million victims of trafficking are smuggled across international borders annually. UNICEF estimates that 1.2 million children are trafficked every year as cheap labor or for sexual exploitation.

“It’s the fastest-growing criminal activity in the world,” McKenna said. “Criminals realize there is a lot of money to be made.”

## **Spearheaded law**

As attorney general, McKenna has zeroed in on consumers of child pornography. In 2009, he drafted and won passage of legislation allowing prosecutors to charge multiple counts of child pornography if they can prove a defendant had a pattern of intentionally viewing multiple images of children engaged in sexually explicit conduct over the Internet.

His view is that child pornography is a permanent record of the sexual abuse of a child, and each time an image of that abuse is viewed, the victim is victimized again.

He praised the Washington, D.C.-based Polaris Project, which operates a human trafficking hot line, offers clinical social services to trafficking victims, and advocates for stronger laws to lock up traffickers.

He also endorsed Linda Smith’s Protected Innocence Initiative, which evaluates sex-trafficking laws state by state and issues regular report cards. Washington’s most recent grade was a C, he said.

## **Four priorities**

The National Association of Attorneys General has identified four priorities to fight human trafficking: Making the case by documenting prosecutions of traffickers by individual states; holding traffickers accountable through tough sentencing laws; mobilizing communities to care for victims so they don’t return to the street; and raising public awareness.

McKenna said some people question why laws against sex trafficking are needed when most states already have laws against promoting prostitution.

To them, he says, “Organized crime is worse than random crime and deserves stronger penalties.”

McKenna saved some of his sharpest words for what he considers a subtle cultural tolerance for sex trafficking. For example, he said, alternative weeklies promote the web site backpage.com, which he said lures young people into forced prostitution.

“Let’s be clear, there are very few people in prostitution who are volunteers,” he said. “With respect to those under 18, we should have no tolerance for arguments that they have given consent. . . . Slavery is morally reprehensible and should not be tolerated by anyone, and yet it is.”

Kathie Durbin: 360-735-4523 or [kathie.durbin@columbian.com](mailto:kathie.durbin@columbian.com).