

## Bill takes aim at trafficking of children

Measure would remove need to prove coercion, require offender registration, toughen penalties.

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In conjunction with the release of a report that gives a “C” grade to Texas laws that combat sex trafficking of minors, lawmakers in Austin announced a bill meant to plug legal loopholes and increase penalties for those who buy and sell children for sex.

The measure, filed jointly by Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, and Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, calls for a clarification of the definitions of sex and labor trafficking. It would remove the need to prove force or coercion for those selling children for sex, require an offender convicted of sex trafficking to register as a sex offender, and increase penalties for compelling prostitution of a child.

“I think one of the things we realized is the federal laws were stronger in regards to trafficking of a child than the state” laws, Van de Putte said.

Currently, the state trafficking law requires prosecutors to show “force or coercion” to prove a minor was sold for sex. The federal law does not. “The bill is a combination of hard work from over 200-plus stakeholders who identified these holes,” including a 47-member statewide Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force formed in the previous legislative session, Van de Putte said.

Much of what would be changed by the bill is spotlighted as a needed improvement in the report that analyzed Texas law as part of the Protected Innocence Initiative by Shared Hope International, an anti-trafficking non-profit group, and the American Center for Law and Justice.

The report looked at six components of state law, including the criminalization of children forced into prostitution, protective provisions for child victims and the penalties for traffickers and facilitators, according to a Shared Hope International news release.

Linda Smith, president and founder of the organization, was in San Antonio on Tuesday to describe the study to about 200 participants at an anti-trafficking conference sponsored by the Texas Attorney General's Office, which oversees the statewide taskforce.

All 50 states will be similarly graded, Smith said, and a national report is to be released later this year.

The group had examined law enforcement, community and social service response to the issue in Bexar County in late 2007, and Smith said while a “C” shows need for improvement the state has already come far in addressing the problem.

“In the framework of four years, amazing progress has been made,” she said. “When we were first here, there was child trafficking but a lack of identification of the problem.”

Smith was also in Austin on Wednesday when Van de Putte and Thompson announced the new bills.

“The most important thing for us is to treat our children who are caught in this web of sex trafficking as victims instead of criminals,” Van de Putte said. “And right now we treat them as criminals.”

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