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Momentum gains to toughen Texas' human trafficking laws

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In mid-February, nearly two weeks after the city of Arlington hosted the 2011 Super Bowl, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott said federal, state and local authorities succeeded in cracking down on sex traffickers, netting 133 arrests.

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A-j Austin Bureau

AUSTIN — In mid-February, nearly two weeks after the city of Arlington hosted the 2011 Super Bowl, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott said federal, state and local authorities succeeded in cracking down on sex traffickers, netting 133 arrests.

“Thanks to a coordinated enforcement, public education and deterrence effort, Texas-based law enforcement officials were prepared to respond if we encountered human trafficking victims — or the ruthless criminals who trafficked them,” Abbott said. “By working proactively to prepare for the nation’s most high-profile sporting event, Texas was uniquely positioned to crack down on traffickers and provide much-needed help to their victims.”

But two groups fighting to end what they call modern-day slavery say the state’s efforts are not good enough, particularly when it comes to protecting underage girls, some as young as 9.

Houston-based Children at Risk and Shared Hope International of Vancouver, Wash., give the state a “C” for its fight against child trafficking.

Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, and Reps. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, and Randy Weber, R-Pearland, said after the two groups graded the state that Texas must do much more to stop the rapidly growing crime.

“Today, we celebrate Texas Independence Day,” Van de Putte said Wednesday. “But for the children who are trafficked there is no independence; there is only life without hope.”

“We can do better,” she said.

Abbott’s spokesman, Jerry Strickland, said it is the Texas Legislature that passes the laws and the attorney general is ready to enforce any human trafficking laws the lawmakers pass.

Van de Putte said though she is not happy with the grade the two groups gave Texas, the Legislature is on track to make life tougher for child traffickers.

The progress in advancing these bills, she said, is measured by the change in response from her colleagues.

Several years ago, when she first proposed a crackdown on traffickers and pimps, some of her colleagues asked, "What do you mean trafficking? This only happens in third-world countries," Van de Putte recalled.

But now most of her colleagues, regardless of party affiliation, are on board supporting tougher laws, especially making the crime a first-degree felony for a first conviction and a life sentence for subsequent conviction, said Van de Putte, whose Senate Bill 98 calls for sentences of 25 years to life in prison for convicted human traffickers.

Severe punishment is necessary to deter such crimes because the average age of a trafficked girl is 13 and the punishment the traffickers get is light, Van de Putte said.

For instance, about a year ago in her hometown of San Antonio, a married couple was convicted of prostituting a young girl but the man received only seven years in jail and the woman five.

Thompson, who has filed anti-trafficking bills in previous sessions as well as this session, said tougher laws are needed because of the more than a million women and children trafficked annually in the United States — about 20 percent of those are in Texas.

Thus, the purpose of her House Bill 7 is "to put the pimps out of business," Thompson said.

Weber, who filed HB 1122, said his goal is also to punish men who have sex with trafficked girls.

"We should go after the johns," Weber said. "To those who prey upon our children, we will not only find you but we will prosecute you."

Van de Putte said as of now few traffickers and men who have sex with minors are prosecuted.

The three lawmakers are also calling for anyone convicted of trafficking or having sex with trafficked minors to be registered as sex offenders.

"Real men do not buy sex," Van de Putte said. "Real men do not buy sex from children, and that's the message we need to get across to Texas now."

Although some law enforcement officials in West Texas say human trafficking is not a major problem in the region, Robert Sanborn, president of Children at Risk, said they are in denial.

"This is happening everywhere, not just in the big cities," Sanborn said.

Although redistricting and a budget shortfall of up to \$27 billion are expected to be the main priorities this session, human trafficking laws are also expected to pass.

Gov. Rick Perry supports the tough measures, his spokesman, Mark Miner, said after Abbott announced the results of the Super Bowl crackdown on traffickers.


In addition, at a recent human trafficking conference in Austin, Perry said: "Human traffickers and


their illicit activities are scourge and must be driven from the state.”

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