



Michigan lawmakers take stand against 'scourge' of human trafficking

Bills aim to stop perpetrators, aid victims of 'modern-day slavery'

by Michigan Sen. Judy Emmons (senjemmons@senate.michigan.gov)

The words "human trafficking" carry only a small sense of the evil held in the definition of the term. This form of modern-day slavery encompasses people from every walk of life, every part of the country and every socioeconomic status.

As a mother, a grandmother and a state senator, it sickens me to think that thousands of girls under the age of 18 are sold into the world of sex trafficking each year and that 80 percent of trafficking victims are sexually exploited.

My No. 1 priority has been to increase public awareness of the issue. It is the first step toward eradication.

Unfortunately, few are aware of how pervasive this crime is. The nature of the crimes involved with human trafficking include dark, disturbing actions about which we as a society do not want to think or talk. Public awareness is a significant portion of the fight against this scourge in our country.

Yet for those who are aware of it, human trafficking might be something one would expect to happen in other parts of the world or large urban centers such as New York, Miami and Los Angeles. The facts show, however, that individuals are enslaved and trafficked even here in the Midwest. In fact, the proximity of the international border with Canada makes cities such as Detroit, Chicago and Toledo, Ohio, ideal places for such crimes to occur.

Because human-trafficking crimes are reported and dealt with in various ways, hard numbers are generally difficult to determine. However, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that within the country, 300,000 children are at risk every year for commercial sexual exploitation. Globally, according to Manna Freedom, an organization for the prevention of human trafficking, two children become victims every minute.

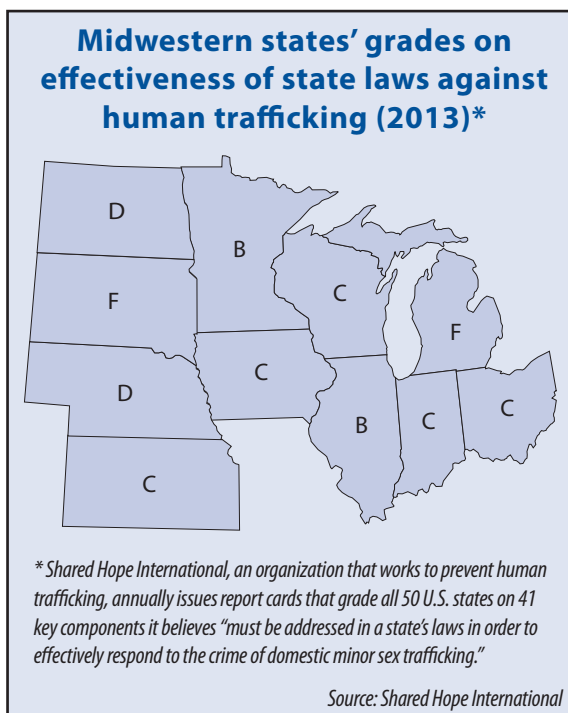
Midwest hardly a safe haven

The Justice Department has placed Chicago and St. Louis on its list of top trafficking jurisdictions in the country, and Shared Hope International, another group that works to prevent sex trafficking, has ranked Michigan as the fifth-worst state in trafficking prevention. These crimes are real and prevalent in this region, and we must become more aware of their reality.

Here in the Midwest, we do not recognize that human trafficking can be as close as next door. That was the case for me until a military veteran in my district gave me the book "The Slave Across the Street" by Theresa Flores.

This gripping story tells of a young girl who was taken from her affluent, suburban Michigan neighborhood and trafficked each night. It helped me understand that human trafficking affects every walk of life. It has no defined face. It cuts across age, race, gender, economic status and geographic location. Anyone, anywhere, can be a victim.

In order to effect a change here in Michigan, I realized that I needed to hear from those who are directly involved. I began to speak with survivors, service providers, law enforcement



and public safety officers, members of the adult-entertainment industry, and many more.

Using the input I received, I worked with a bipartisan group of 13 of my Senate colleagues. We have crafted a legislative package that we believe will play a significant role in crippling this criminal industry and providing safety and peace of mind to the victim survivors.

Our aim is to hinder the perpetrators of these crimes in several ways. One key way is to eliminate the statute of limitations for trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation offenses involving minors. If someone chooses to attempt this type of crime against the children in our communities, they should know that they can be prosecuted at any point in the future.

In Michigan, there is already no statute of limitations for several of the most severe crimes, and enslaving another human life should be treated in the same way. This legislation is named after Theresa Flores, in honor of her survival here in Michigan.

In addition, we want to allow survivors to be able to sue their captors for emotional and physical damages suffered while in captivity, again sending a message that perpetrators cannot simply walk away from their crimes.

It is also important to hamper the demand for human trafficking on the consumer side.

We are seeking to give local municipalities the ability to adopt ordinances requiring anyone working at an adult-entertainment business to obtain a permit. This could help ensure that these workers are of legal age and working there by their own choice. This legislation will be named in memory of Stephanie Brown, a young Michigan girl who lost her life as a result of this type of work. She is the granddaughter of one of our advisory board members, Richard Sands.

We are also planning to require a \$3 fee to be paid by each customer of an adult-entertainment facility, with the money going to a fund to help victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Finally, we

will require those who are caught purchasing sex to be placed on the sex-offender registry.

Easing victims' burden is vital

This effort would not be complete without also attempting to create assurances of safety for victims and peace of mind for survivors.

In Michigan, a person is a minor until the age of 18; however, the minimum age for prostitution-related crimes is 16. It is logical that someone who cannot give legal consent on any other matter should not be prosecuted for choosing to enter the prostitution business. This legislation would also require the probate court to promptly conduct a hearing to determine if there is reasonable cause that the juvenile is a trafficking victim.

I also want to make assistance from state agencies more readily available to victims and survivors.

With our legislation, the Michigan Department of Human Services will use a different status for children who are victims of trafficking in order to provide them with additional services or to give them special consideration that traditional foster-care services may not be able to facilitate. This is intended to keep these children from being revictimized as they move from one placement to the next. Survivors will also have better access to benefits for medical assistance and psychological treatment.

Legally, victims will have the opportunity to give an affirmative defense position, allowing them to introduce evidence of being a victim of human trafficking as a defense to certain types of crimes. We also want to give survivors the opportunity to apply to have their criminal convictions cleared from their record if the offense was committed due to their status as a victim of a human-trafficking violation.

Since this package of bills was introduced, more issues have been brought to my attention, and we are continuing to look for other ways to eradicate this evil practice and protect our society's most vulnerable individuals.

Please help me shine a light on human trafficking in the Midwest and beyond. If you have questions or would like to discuss this legislation further, please feel free to contact me at 866.305.2133 or senjemmons@senate.michigan.gov. ★

Michigan Sen. Judy Emmons, a Republican from Sheridan, has served in the state Legislature since 2003.

Submissions welcome

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