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Texas on the Potomac

Washington news with a Texas accent

Texans on Capitol Hill target "rampant" sex trafficking in Texas and elsewhere

Posted on November 19, 2013 | By Stewart Powell

PRINT 3

With an estimated 25 percent of the nation's sex trafficking victims hailing from the Lone Star State, Texas Sen. John Cornyn and Texas Congressman Ted Poe led an effort on Capitol Hill on Tuesday to punish "Johns" as harshly as "pimps."

The lawmakers' proposed legislation, filed in the House and Senate with bipartisan support, would impose penalties of 15 years to life on convicted customers as well as convicted traffickers of sex slaves younger than 14 years old.

For victims of sexual exploitation between the ages of 14 and 18, the penalty would drop to 10 years to life.



Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File)



Rep. Ted Poe (Julio Cortez / Chronicle)

Cornyn, a former Texas state attorney general and state supreme court judge, called sex trafficking "one the more heinous crimes where human beings are being exploited," adding: "Modern day sex slavery is unfortunately rampant." The so-called "Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act" would boost support for innocent victims of human trafficking, bolster law enforcement budgets and hike penalties to combat child sex trafficking, child pornography, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

"Everyone here today recognizes the atrocity of human trafficking, and we've united across party lines and in bicameral fashion, as you can tell, to take a firm stand against it."

Poe, a Republican from Humble, said sex trafficking rings prey on the large number of immigrant women and girls living in the Houston area and across Texas, accounting for a disproportionate share of the estimated 300,000 sex trafficking cases prosecuted each year.

"Unfortunately my hometown of Houston is one of the hubs of sex trafficking in the United States," said Poe, a former criminal court judge and prosecutor in Harris County for 22 years. "That's unfortunate. That's wrong."

In addition to additional penalties on customers as well as traffickers, the proposal would draw between \$15 million and \$20 million a year from convicted traffickers' seized assets and fines imposed upon them – money that can be used to help victims recover and law enforcement to pursue additional culprits.

"You're dealing with a sophisticated group of criminals who don't really respect county lines or state lines or even international lines," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., a former prosecutor who co-sponsored the measure. "We have to up our game and be as sophisticated as the perpetrators who are breaking these laws."

Cornyn was joined by Klobuchar and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, as co-sponsors of the measure in the Senate; Poe was joined by Reps. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., and Rick Nolan, D-Minn., as co-sponsors in the House.

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