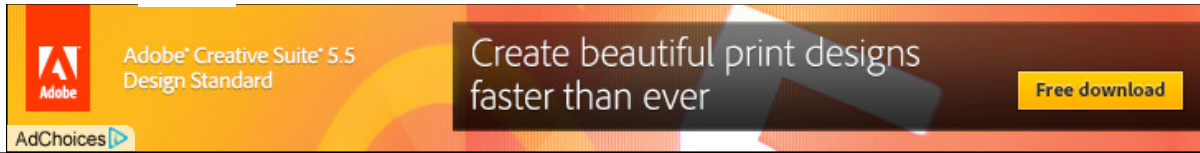




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Hawaii aims to clean up its image with new laws against prostitution and labor traffickers

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HONOLULU — Hawaii is cracking down on prostitution and worker exploitation by passing new laws amid the nation's largest-ever human trafficking case.

Hawaii was one of only four states lacking a labor trafficking law or a sex trafficking law before Gov. Neil Abercrombie signed the measures this week, according to the Polaris Project, a Washington-based advocacy group against human trafficking.

The new laws are being enacted as the federal government is already prosecuting labor recruiting company Global Horizons on accusations of oppressing hundreds of Thai laborers by bringing them to farms in the U.S., failing to pay them for work performed, putting them into debt, confiscating their passports and threatening to deport them. A separate federal case involves similar allegations against Hawaii's second-largest farm, Aloun Farms.

The laws also empower police to more strongly combat prostitution when world leaders from 21 countries meet in Honolulu in November for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

After years of opposing a human trafficking law, law enforcement joined forces with advocates to get a proposal approved by the Legislature and governor.

Prosecutors and police argued in previous years that the state didn't need a separate human trafficking law because crimes could be targeted with existing extortion and terroristic threatening laws, but they supported the new provision this year as a way to strengthen their authority to pursue such cases.

"We're going after people who exploit others for profit," said Honolulu Prosecutor Keith Kaneshiro. "What we're doing is putting an emphasis on it. Let's increase the penalties and make it a tougher law."



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Both the labor trafficking and prostitution laws come with felony penalties reaching up to 20 years imprisonment.

The prostitution law makes it easier for prostitutes to enter into witness protection programs so they can testify against their pimps in court, increases felony sentences for promoting prostitution and allows johns to be arrested on prostitution charges. It also increases penalties on people repeatedly convicted of soliciting prostitutes.

"We're hoping that with these laws, it will help stem the tide of prostitution," said Kathryn Xian, executive director for the Pacific Alliance to Stop Slavery.

Tourism officials and police have said they're concerned about a heavy increase in prostitution during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, when pimps bring more sex-trade workers to Honolulu to cater to international demand. About 20,000 people are expected to attend the meeting, including President Barack Obama, foreign delegates and business leaders.

Publicity about Hawaii's tough prostitution laws and the training for police officers that comes with it should deter solicitation attempts during APEC, Xian and Kaneshiro said.

"You don't want people to say, 'Well, Hawaii's a good place to visit, it's paradise, but they're soft on crime,'" said Rep. John Mizuno, D-Alewa Heights-Kalihi, who pushed for the laws. "It makes Hawaii look respectable, and we will prosecute these crimes seriously."

Police will become more likely to know what questions to ask potential victims of trafficking and arrest their tormenters because of the new law, said Clare Hanusz, an attorney who represents dozens of Thai laborers who claim they were mistreated.

"It's a significant deterrent. It puts traffickers on notice that even if they don't attract the attention of the federal government, state law enforcement is aware of those kind of activities," Hanusz said.

Both laws take effect July 1.

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