

Human trafficking becomes critical issue in state

Lubbock Republican state Rep. John Frullo will be in Corpus Christi for what is billed as a statewide summit on human trafficking.

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By [Enrique Rangel](#)

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AUSTIN — It is not often Texas Legislature panels hold public hearings throughout the state, but when they do it is usually to discuss critical issues such as redistricting and property taxes.

Human trafficking is now one of those issues.

On Thursday, Lubbock Republican state Rep. John Frullo and members of a joint legislative committee recently appointed to look into this issue will be in Corpus Christi for what is billed as a statewide summit on human trafficking. It will be the first of several meetings outside of Austin before the lawmakers are back in session on Jan. 8.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and House Speaker Joe Straus included human trafficking in their long list of interim charges, key issues the lawmakers take an in-depth look at before the Legislature is back in session.

“It is time to bring awareness to this,” Rep. Todd Hunter, R-Corpus Christi, said in reference to the all-day meeting he will chair. “We need to show that the Texas Legislature is not only 100 percent but a 1,000 percent behind passing the laws in the state to get rid of this (criminal activity).”

Testimony the representatives and senators in the panel heard from a variety of law enforcement officials March 5 indicated though Texas has made significant progress in going after human traffickers, particularly those who prostitute minors, much more needs to be done to crack down on this criminal activity, particularly in getting the public involved.

As Frullo noted in an interview, two recent cases in Lubbock show human trafficking happens everywhere, not just in the big cities, or — as a good number of Americans believe — in other countries.

In August, Chanze Lamount Pringler, 25, was found guilty of conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of a child, and last month, Markee Toliver, 19, was charged with using a website to arrange sexual encounters between men and an underage girl.

“A lot more is going on than we know of, which means we may not be doing a good job at tackling the problem,” Frullo said in reference to elected officials and law enforcement agencies at the local, state and federal levels.

“One girl was brought in when she was 5 years old and was trafficked until she was 12 or 13,” Frullo said in reference to some of the testimony the panel heard. “In some cases kids don’t know where to go for help.”

Steve McCraw, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, sees the root of the problem the same way.

“The trafficking and placement occurs daily throughout the state and throughout the nation,” McCraw said at the

hearing. “It is little reported or under-reported.”

Selling girls online

If the Legislature and law enforcement agencies are going to be successful in cracking down on human traffickers, they need to work as a team and develop a new approach, some witnesses told the legislators.

Solutions offered include helping the public get more involved, just as it happened after the Sept. 11, 2011, terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C. and in the skies above Pennsylvania. In addition, everyone needs to understand how pimps use the Internet and social media to exploit their victims, a good number of whom are runaways.

“Anybody in any city in Texas can go to the Internet and have a girl delivered to a motel room in 30 minutes,” Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, co-chair of the joint panel, said in a question and answer period with McCraw.

Another solution offered is for the judicial system to treat the underage girls as victims, not as criminals, when they are arrested for prostitution.

“We need to educate the juries as to what those girls go through,” said Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, who also co-chairs the joint panel. Van de Putte and Thompson have filed anti-human trafficking legislation for several sessions. Two bills they passed last year toughen the penalties convicted offenders receive.

Frullo said he is hopeful the hearings — the next one will be in McAllen in mid-April — will bring more public awareness to the problem and at the same time, help the lawmakers understand what more needs to be done to crack down on human traffickers.

For him, one possibility is filing a bill that would toughen the penalties for people convicted of paying to have sex with minors, Frullo said.

“That is part of the solution right there,” he said.

Source: Texas Legislature

Going after pimps and child predators

In recent sessions the Texas Legislature has passed bills aimed at cracking down on human trafficking, particularly on pimps convicted of exploiting underage girls. These are some of the laws passed in last year's session, including one filed by Rep, John Frullo. HB means House bill and SB means Senate bill.

- SB 24 by Sen. Van de Putte. Makes trafficking children a first-degree felony which carries a five to 99 years in prison plus a fine of up to \$10,000.
- HB 3000 by Thompson. Eliminates statutes of limitations and anyone convicted of a second offense is sentenced to life in prison without parole.
- HB 1994 by Rep. Randy Weber, R-Pearland. Established a program to educate first-time offenders that prostitution is not a victimless crime and about the harsh penalties of a second conviction.
- HB 3746 by Frullo. Frullo named his bill Alicia's Law, in honor of Alicia Kozakeiwicz, a 24-year-old Pennsylvania woman who was kidnapped and raped by a man she met online when she was 13. The bill gives law enforcement agencies more financial resources to go after online predators of children.

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