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Published: Saturday, February 11, 2012

## GUEST COMMENTARY / HUMAN TRAFFICKING

# We must remain vigilant in this struggle

By Sens. Val Stevens and Jerome Delvin

Each year we as senators are called upon to address issues in our state. Sometimes we get lucky, and with one simple piece of legislation we can settle a technical or legal question and make life easier for our citizens. However, we know ending the trafficking of human beings in Washington will be anything but easy.

It's difficult to explain just how serious the problem of human trafficking is in our state. Statistics tell part of the story, but what hits home with us are the gut-wrenching stories we hear from victims who come to the Capitol. Some became trapped in child-sex rings. Some are tricked into entering a relationship with a man they only later find out is a pimp. Others are runaways who stumble into the underground world of human trafficking and can't get out, forced into modern day slavery by threats or force. Still more are brought into the country as migrant workers, becoming victims as they try to make a better life for themselves and their family.

Unfortunately, Washington is a hub for human trafficking mainly because of its international ports. Children and adults are easily funneled in and out through shipyards, never to be heard from again.

Fortunately, a large, bipartisan group of legislators is committed to battling this problem. The philosophical and geographical differences that may separate us on other issues are no factor; we all feel passionately about helping these innocent victims and holding the perpetrators of these crimes accountable. Over the past 10 years we've learned the only way to do that is to go after the lowlives and, as we learn more about their tactics, respond with new laws.

With that strategy in mind legislators are sponsoring more than a dozen bills this year. We are the prime sponsors of three of these measures, two of which have moved forward in the legislative process.

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Senate Bill 6258 would expand the criminal definition of "luring" unaccompanied minors to include transportation facilities. Many pimps use bus terminals to lie in wait for unaccompanied minors arriving in a new city; they pretend to be friendly but in reality, these evil individuals often lead new victims into the world of human trafficking. This bill was passed unanimously in the Senate.

Senate Bill 6254, which also passed the Senate with full support and is now headed to the House, would address the horrific cases we have heard about mentally disabled individuals being taken advantage of by traffickers. Persons charged with prostitution must prove they were forced to be considered victims of human trafficking. This bill removes that requirement when the victim is mentally disabled.

Even though we're sometimes reminded of that carnival game, in which whacking one rodent only causes another to pop up from a different hole, we have to believe that the cumulative weight of these efforts will make human trafficking a less lucrative crime. This fight takes dedication and new legislation year after year, but it's a fight we are determined to win.

*Sen. Val Stevens (R-Arlington) is a vocal advocate for the protection of children. Sen. Jerome Delvin (R-Richland), is a former law enforcement officer. For more information, visit [www.senaterepublicans.wa.gov/humantrafficking](http://www.senaterepublicans.wa.gov/humantrafficking).*

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