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Waging war on human trafficking

State and local officials are making good on their promise to curb sex trafficking.



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It's a long way from The Body Shop to the places where bodies are actually shopped. One is a shiny, sweet-smelling store in Seattle's Pacific Place; the other could be any hotel room in the region, from a fancy downtown hotel to some rundown motel by the airport.

But it was here, outside a store built around beauty, where company officials and Washington State Attorney General Rob McKenna gathered the other day to talk about an ugly problem: human trafficking. The coercion, abuse and sale of young people and children for sex. It's the fastest-growing criminal activity in the world, according to the United Nations, bringing in an estimated \$32 billion a year.

The sex trade also has — sorry to say — put the Northwest on the map.

In 2010, the FBI conducted its annual national operation to recover juvenile prostitutes and arrest their pimps. One-third of the 69 children rescued in 40 cities were in the Seattle-Everett-Tacoma area. One-third.

Thankfully, shame is a powerful motivator.

Within months of the FBI's rescue operation, Gov. Chris Gregoire signed legislation to strengthen the criminal definition of trafficking and improve services for trafficking victims and their families. The state already was the first to criminalize sex trafficking, which it did in 2003.

But the action continues, and in a big way: In the Legislature this session, there are no fewer than a dozen bills being introduced seeking to curb sex trafficking.

One bill would require classified-advertising companies to attempt to verify the age of escorts listed in sex-related postings. Another would increase the penalty for soliciting prostitution from \$150 to \$3,000; and pimps who promote prostitution would be fined \$1,500 instead of \$300.

And there are events like the one the other day in front of The Body Shop, where McKenna accepted a petition with 720,000 signatures that the chain had collected nationwide, calling for the protection of sex-trafficking victims.

McKenna was the right guy to accept it; as president of the National Association of Attorneys General, he demanded last summer that backpage.com — the online classified-advertising site owned by Village Voice Media Holdings — back up its claims that it enforced policies to prevent child sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

The backpage.com controversy and the FBI sting was a surprising wake-up call for most of us. For the first time, we saw what could really be going on not just on well-worn Aurora Avenue, but at such everyday places as Westlake Center. There, in 2010, the Seattle Police Department dressed two undercover cops as teen girls, complete with backpacks and phones for texting. Two pimps approached them within 45 minutes.

Even more surprising — and remarkable — is how quickly lawmakers have zeroed in on the problem. There's little political gain in protecting these lost girls, but lawmakers are all over the issue, and without any of the usual Northwest-style passive-aggressive, all-talk-and-no-action. They're moving on this thing. They want change. They want to save these girls, these families and make sure that the men who victimize them pay, and pay big.

"I don't think we appreciated the extent of it," said Shelley Simmons, The Body Shop's brand communications and values director. "The fact that anyone can be enslaved in this day and age is abhorrent." McKenna, who has made human trafficking his presidential initiative, said we are at "a tipping point," and outlined a four-point program that he and his fellow attorneys general will push in their respective states.

First, they want to "make the case," and collect hard data to identify victims, traffickers and buyers. They will prosecute traffickers and buyers. They will gather information about victims, and mobilize communities to help them get out of "modern-day slavery," as McKenna called it, and pursue a better life.

And they will raise awareness, advertising at the Super Bowl.

Usually it's my job to poke politicians into acting on their words and keeping their behind-the-podium promises.

This time, and on this issue, they're keeping their word in the name of the victims. Nice work.

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Tuesday and Friday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com.

Keep it up.