



## Let's work harder to fight human trafficking

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Human trafficking is happening in the United States – and it affects more than 100,000 American children every year. Today, we write to commemorate National Human Trafficking Awareness Day and introduce bipartisan legislation to protect Montana's most vulnerable citizens.

Human trafficking includes forced labor, involuntary servitude for commercial sexual activity, and forced domestic labor. Both federal and state law clearly define sex trafficking as any commercial sex act involving a person under the age of 18. However, Montana recently received an "F" for the second year from the organization "Shared Hope" ([www.sharedhope.com](http://www.sharedhope.com)). Every state received a comprehensive analysis and report card, grading each on 41 legal components that directly impact domestic minor sex trafficking. Working with groups like Shared Hope and the Flathead Abolitionist Movement, we are presenting legislation to correct Montana's failing grade.

Coordinating with the Kalispell Soroptimists, Shared Hope hosted an extensive human trafficking training in Kalispell. More than 200 people from the community, law enforcement, service providers and juvenile justice professionals learned to identify and respond to child sex trafficking in their communities.

Our bills address a number of recommendations made in the 2011 and 2012 report by Shared Hope and the Flathead Abolitionist Movement. Our bills seek to:

- Protect minors by removing the requirement to prove force, fraud or coercion under the state human trafficking law for minors;
- Create a mandatory posting of the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline in transit hot spots;
- Strengthen penalties for buyers of sex with minors by amending the state human trafficking, prostitution, promoting prostitution and aggravated promotion of prostitution laws and prohibit a mistake of age defense under the trafficking and CSEC laws; and,
- Enact a mandatory criminal asset forfeiture law that allows for seizure of assets related to involuntary servitude for commercial sexual activity offenses and forfeiture to the state upon conviction, with some assets being directed to victim services.

Human trafficking is happening in the United States. It is easy to think of as a big city problem, or a problem that only occurs overseas. It is happening in Montana. In March of 2011, two men involved in a prostitution ring in Missoula plead guilty to "aggravated" promotion of prostitution of three girls under the age of 18. Last summer, two adults in Kalispell were arrested for

prostituting a 13-year-old girl for drug money. And with increased demand in the Bakken, we are already getting reports of underage prostitution.

That is why we've introduced legislation in the 2013 Legislature to improve Montana's laws to combat human trafficking. One of us is a Democrat, the other a Republican. But this issue knows no party lines.

"Tightening the state laws in each state will ensure that traffickers will not find a safe place to commit their crimes and at the same time protects the children," Shared Hope's founder, Congresswoman Linda Smith has said, and we couldn't agree more.

We both ran for office feeling an immense responsibility to make Montana a safe place for children. We seek to protect the most vulnerable of Montana. In an era of highly partisan divides, this issue presents an opportunity for all Montanans to unify.

*Rep. Jenifer Gursky represents House District 98 in Missoula, and Rep. Sarah Laszloffy represents House District 57 in Laurel.*