

Massachusetts moves to crack down on human trafficking - The Boston Globe

By Alyssa A. Botelho | Globe Correspondent August 19, 2013

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Massachusetts took another step Monday in its crackdown on human trafficking, a brutal and often invisible enterprise that drags countless victims into prostitution and forced labor each year, with a new set of recommendations presented by Attorney General Martha Coakley to the Legislature.

“These are victims often with no voice of their own and very few voices to speak for them,” Coakley said in a press conference at her office. “Unlike the sale of guns and drugs, which are sold out of the traffickers’ inventory, a trafficked person may be sold over and over again, for sex or labor or both.”

Coakley’s recommendations stem from the work of a 19-member task force of legislators, police, social workers, activists, and survivors formed in 2011 after the signing of the state’s human trafficking law, which aligned Massachusetts with 46 other states that have banned the trade.

“This is a very comprehensive road map . . . for how we can move forward effectively,” said state Representative Eugene L. O’Flaherty, a Chelsea Democrat who sponsored the 2011 House bill.

Among the recommendations from the task force: creating pilot safe houses for people escaping the trade, establishing a first-offender program or “john school” to rehabilitate sex-buying customers to stem demand, and building a data collection system to keep track of traffickers and their victims.

The proposals, officials said, are designed to change how prosecutors and police approach the sex trade by shifting focus from prostitutes to traffickers, who often escape unnoticed while the women they victimize face charges.

“We acknowledge that law enforcement must shift from criminalizing the acts of victims to eradicating the demand with aggressive political action,” said Daniel Linskey, superintendent in chief of the Boston Police Department.

He estimated that hundreds of women, if not more, are victims of trafficking each year in Greater Boston.

Audrey Morrissey, a survivor of the commercial sex industry and associate director of the victims’ service agency “My Life My Choice,” said safe houses and educational programs are vitally needed to help victims, especially young women, leave the trade.

She was recruited to be a prostitute in Boston’s Combat Zone at age 16 and could not get out of the trade until age 30, when she was treated for substance abuse.

“The only way I could deal with what I was going through, and numb myself, was by becoming a heroin addict,” Morrissey said.

“When I look back at that, I wonder how that could have been avoided, had there been services, had there been somewhere to go.”

Such resources, Morrissey added, must not only serve young sex workers, who are offered protection through child services, but also adult women who “have aged out of the system.”

The hurdles for implementing such initiatives could be high, officials said Monday, because the commercial sex industry has become more veiled with the rise of Internet businesses that allow pimps to schedule sex workers without on-street solicitation.

“Go on the Internet and look at how many ads [for escort services] are on Backpage or Craigslist,” Linskey said. “For each one of those pictures, that’s a victim.”

While some recommended projects will require additional tax dollars and private money, Coakley said, many of the initiatives to fight trafficking are neither complex nor resource-intensive.

One such change is creating a standard for what human trafficking entails across local, state, and federal agencies, which all document victims of trafficking in slightly different ways.

“We want to get some kind of definitions, so we’re all talking about the same kind of incidents,” Coakley said. “. . . When a crime is charged, let’s treat it the same way whether it’s in Newton or Boston or North Adams, or it’s a federal crime.”

Such simple policy changes, officials said, could pave the way for vital programming for victims who have to start from scratch in rebuilding their lives after spending their adolescence at the mercy of their traffickers.

“I am hopeful that children will no longer be blamed for crimes against them,” Morrissey said. “Back when I was a child, we took charges for the johns and the purchasers.

“There was always a powerful person behind them, and I want to see them punished.”

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