

Utah lawmaker wants death penalty for sex traffickers

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"Rep. Paul Ray, R-Clearfield, is pushing to make child sex trafficking a capital offense. (AP...

SALT LAKE CITY — A Davis County Republican wants to give convicted child sex traffickers the ultimate punishment – the death penalty.

Rep. Paul Ray, R-Clinton, is pushing to make child sex trafficking a capital offense. He says he accompanied the Salt

Lake City vice squad on patrol a few years ago. He's realized how big an issue child trafficking is in Utah. He said he's been working on bills to target prostitution and trafficking for years.

"I got so fed up with what I've seen," Ray said. "It's time to take the ultimate jump and say if you traffic a kid for sex, we're going to kill you."

Marina Lowe, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah, said the group opposes capital punishment in all forms. Lowe cited some of the current botched lethal injections as ways that America is finding out that the death penalty is not effective.

"At the end of the day it's our position that the state shouldn't be in the business of killing it's citizens," said Lowe. Lowe added she thinks Ray's proposal is unconstitutional.

In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled child rape is not punishable by death, striking down a Louisiana law as unconstitutional because the punishment was "cruel and unusual."

Ray acknowledged that the bill could be challenged in the court. He said he was 50/50 on whether it would stand up, but he said he's willing to take the chance. He said that he would love to fight for this law at a federal level.

"I'm going turn the tables on them, and say prove to me why you can execute for treason and I can't execute for a crime that in my world is 10 times worse than treason," Ray said.

Ray added he would have to add a constitutional note to the bill. A constitutional note sends a message to legislators that the bill may be legally challenged in the court system.

Parker Douglas, chief of staff of the Utah Attorney General's office, said it's the office's policy to defend laws that are legally passed in Utah, whether they personally agree with the them or not.

Ed Smart, the director of prevention and rehabilitation of Operation Underground Railroad, a organization that works with victims of the sex trade, said he needed more time to decide whether he supports the bill. Smart said child sex trafficking is prevalent in Utah but it's hard to pin down the numbers because of its secretive nature.

"I have not met one of those who have been prostituted or trafficked who have chose to be there," Smart said.

Smart, kidnap victim Elizabeth Smart's father, said he would like for Utah to follow after Sweden and start cracking down on those who visit prostitutes. He said he believes the (solicitors) now only get a slap on the wrist. He said the key is to cut down on the demand for the services, noting Sweden cut their prostitution on the street in half. Smart said there's need to have a deterrent to participating.

Ray said that he thinks the death penalty would deter child sex trafficking. He said murder is a crime of passion and people dont really think of the consequences. He said the traffickers premeditate their crimes and go to a lot of work to avoid the law.

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