

Report: Strengthen SC human trafficking policies

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ALAN WILSON

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In 2016, the global cruise industry generated about \$35.5 billion. For the global music industry, the take was \$15.7 billion.

And for the human trafficking trade — a worldwide issue with an estimated 42 million victims — the bottom line is about \$150 billion, according to the United Nations' International Labour Organization.

“It is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world, and the United States is the number one destination for human trafficking,” state Attorney General Alan Wilson said.

In 2016, Atlanta and Charlotte were among the 25 U.S. cities with the highest number of calls to the National Human Trafficking hotline.

As of Dec. 29, there are 72 human trafficking cases pending in state courts. Greenville County is a hotspot, with 15 cases reported, making Greenwood and other Lakelands counties susceptible to victims passing through, Wilson said.

“That makes South Carolina a prime location for human trafficking to thrive and exist,” Wilson said Monday, days after his office released its 2017 annual report focusing on the crime's presence in the state. January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

Although South Carolina didn't see its first human trafficking-related conviction until 2015, officials have been building a framework since 2012 to tackle the problem.

“This is something that when I was first elected in 2010 and took office in 2011, I did not realize — and I don't think many people did — that human trafficking was a problem (in the state),” he said. “I think we all thought of it as a surreal Hollywood crime that happens in a foreign country or big cities like Chicago or New York. But what we discovered over the last seven years is, it's a real and present danger in South Carolina.”

On Thursday, Wilson will have a press conference with the South Carolina Trucking Association announcing a formal partnership with Truckers Against Trafficking, a Colorado-based nonprofit.

“We have been promoting awareness and participation within our membership for some time, but this will launch a more formal partnership, and a higher level of commitment. Our industry and our drivers — who are well-positioned to serve as an extra set of eyes and ears for law enforcement — can help alert and deter this insidious behavior,” state trucking association president Rick Todd said. “Truck drivers by and large are patriotic, brave and always on the look-out for threats to public safety. We believe they will bring value to the service of this cause.”

Wilson's office earlier this month hosted the Southeast Human Trafficking Coalition, a two-day forum comprised of advocates and policy makers from eight states.

“To turn the tide on trafficking we must be able to properly

define it, recognize it, and know who to call when we see it,” said Jerry Redman, Chief Executive Officer of Chattanooga-based Second Life Tennessee. “Our working group exists to strengthen collaboration in each of our states and between our states. This commitment to collaboration is vital to begin winning this fight. Trafficking victims’ lives depend on it.”

In many ways, South Carolina’s efforts to quantify the scope of human trafficking activity bring officials into uncharted territory. The state lacks certified victim services programs and has no comprehensive statistics.

Another shortcoming, the report finds, is the absence of residential services for adult and child trafficking victims. But that’s set to change this spring, when Jasmine Road opens in Greenville.

The two-year program will offer adult female trafficking victims medical care, trauma counseling and life skills, diverting them from the streets or prison. The state also has laws that prohibit victims of trafficking from being prosecuted.

“The new laws that were passed in 2012 were really progressive at the time, but there’s still a lot of work to be done,” said Marie Majarais, executive director of Jasmine Road and a member of the state’s Human Trafficking Task Force. “I think the recognition and awareness is there, and now it’s just getting the resources, and unfortunately, that’s money and time and talent.”

A primary goal of the task force is establishing youth diversion courts for commercially sexually exploited children, but that effort is on hold through 2018.

However, Wilson said, officials in 2015 were able to grant the state grand jury oversight for human trafficking violations, eliminating jurisdictional boundaries that can make the cases difficult to prosecute for solicitors.

“Human traffickers can ingress and egress, the problem is law enforcement has jurisdictional boundaries and it makes it very difficult to investigate when it goes across two or three counties,” Wilson said.

State Rep. John McCravy, R-Greenwood and a member of the House Judiciary Committee, said he supports South Carolina’s aggressive pursuit to eradicate human trafficking.

“Human trafficking is the most heinous of crimes, involving kidnapping and slavery. I congratulate our attorney general for pursuing these perpetrators and working for the maximum penalty,” McCravy said. “The House has this issue on the radar and stands ready to work with the attorney general to give him the tools he needs to prosecute these evil people.”

Majarais and Wilson said ongoing education is key to strengthening the state’s human trafficking policies.

“The fact that it’s (Jasmine Road) localized here in Greenville is eye opening enough for people who don’t even want to believe that cars get broken into,” Majarais said.

Wilson is also part of the bipartisan National Association of Attorneys General human trafficking committee, joining colleagues from Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada,

North Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Utah.

“Just like drug trafficking, human trafficking doesn’t stop at a state border any more than it stops at a county border, so it’s not just important we talk amongst all counties in the state, it’s important we talk amongst all states fighting the same war,” Wilson said. “The sharing of tactics and strategies is so important to developing a comprehensive plan. It’s not liberal versus conservatives, there is no ‘us versus them.’ The battle I’m fighting is ignorance versus awareness.”

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