

Sex trafficking hotline will save lives

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Across the United States at least four million people are traded for forced labor or sexual exploitation every year.

The overlap between trafficking and child maltreatment is inarguable, as is the overlap with homelessness. Ninety-five percent of teens who are prostituted were victims of prior sexual abuse by either family members or close acquaintances. According to 2014 Congressional testimony, the number of 10- to 17-year-olds trafficked in the commercial sex trade likely exceeds 250,000, with 60 percent being runaway, thrown-away or homeless youth.

Those connections mean that youth in or recently out of foster care are at high risk. Nationally, 11 to 37 percent of youth who “age out” are homeless soon thereafter. In Florida, an incredible 28 percent of 1,821 young adults who aged out of the system reported experiencing homelessness. The statistics should scare us.

Sadly, Florida is generally ranked third in the nation in the prevalence of human trafficking. In recent years, Florida has improved its laws to make trafficking a crime with significant penalties and to ensure that persons who are trafficked, especially children, are recognized as victims and not criminals. The Safe Harbor Act that went into effect in 2013 has played a key role in improving treatment of rescued victims, and the Attorney General’s website proclaims Florida to be a zero-tolerance state.

But more must be done to protect our children. House Bill 369 by Reps. Dave Kerner and Ross Spano and Senate Bill 534 by Sen. Jack Latvala seek to undo the secrecy and isolation on which human trafficking thrives. The bills would require the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline to be posted in key transit locations throughout the state, including rest areas, turnpike service plazas, weigh stations, welcome centers and more.

Through the hotline — 1-888-373-7888 or text to 233733 (BeFree) — people being forced into modern-day slavery can safely seek help and those who think someone is being trafficked can anonymously report activities. All this can be done across the country in over 200 languages. But the hotline only works if people know it exists.

Twenty-five states have already adopted legislation similar to that proposed in Florida. Those states have found that the cost of posting the hotline is minimal. While under the Senate bill the attorney general has overall responsibility for enforcement, those normally responsible for conducting inspections will likely check at the same time for compliance with this requirement.

Surely our children are worth this effort by our state. Call your legislators today to ask them to help end trafficking by supporting HB 369 and SB 534. For some children out there, tomorrow or next year will be too late.

CANDICE L. MAZE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FLORIDA FOSTER CARE REVIEW, MIAMI