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Human Trafficking Awareness Day

*Prosecutors Join Task Force, Lawmakers, Law Enforcement, Other Groups
In Calling for More Tools and Resources to Combat Growing Criminal Industry*

MONTGOMERY, Ala. – The Alabama District Attorneys Association is joining state legislators, the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force, the Child Trafficking Solutions Project, law enforcement and human advocacy groups across Alabama in recognizing today, Wednesday, April 24, as Human Trafficking Awareness Day and supporting stronger tools to fight this modern-day slavery, which affects more than 27 million worldwide.

“Human trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in the world, second only to the drug trade as the largest in the world,” said ADAA President Tom Anderson of Enterprise. “Alabama is not immune, as we have seen an increasing number of cases in Alabama involving both sex trafficking and labor trafficking, including children.”

As part of Human Trafficking Awareness Day, Reps. Merika Coleman (D-Birmingham) and Terri Collins (R-Decatur) will hold a 12:30 p.m. press conference today in the Joint Press Room (Room 310) in the State House in Montgomery to introduce four bills aimed at fighting human trafficking in Alabama. The bills – HB260, HB261, HB 262 and HB264 – are scheduled to be taken up by committees in the Alabama House of Representatives on Wednesday.

“As the issue of human trafficking continues to gain local and national attention, including a recent string of arrests in multiple Morgan and Madison County massage parlors last week, we want to make sure Alabama is doing everything it can to be on the forefront of combating this incredibly prevalent issue,” bills’ sponsor Coleman said in a statement.

Collins, who chairs the House Education Policy Committee, added, “The number one way to combat human trafficking is by increasing public awareness, so that is my goal for this legislative session. By working with organizations who have a vested interest in combating human trafficking, we have identified at least four areas of legislation that can be strengthened.”

The bills would require that health care workers receive training in human trafficking; require that trade schools and community colleges provide training on human trafficking in their truck-driving programs; allow for the publication of photos of certain people who are charged with prostitution, especially those who procure, solicit or purchase sex; increase the penalties for certain businesses, such as massage parlors and strip clubs, that are required to but fail to post information about human trafficking hotlines,

and make the Alabama Department of Labor, the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board and the Public Service Commission responsible for enforcing the law's requirements.

The legislators received assistance from a number of organizations in putting together the pieces of legislation, including service providers, law enforcement, the Alabama Attorney General's Office and the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force.

According to the task force, 80 percent of trafficking victims are female, and the average age for entry in sex trafficking is 11-14. About half of the 27 million slaves in the world are children.

One of the first human trafficking cases prosecuted in Alabama involved a 17-year-old girl who in 2013 was kidnapped in Mississippi, drugged and forced to work as a prostitute in Tennessee and Alabama before escaping her abductor in Dothan. Her abductor, Santiago Alonso, was convicted in 2014 in Houston County of first-degree human trafficking and giving a controlled substance to a minor. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

"As district attorneys, our members see cases of human trafficking firsthand," said Barry Matson, executive director of the Alabama District Attorneys Association. "Their call is not just to prosecute the traffickers, though that is critical, but also to help the victims out of their dire situations. Most often, these are children and women who are controlled by traffickers through coercion, physical force or fraud."

The Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force was created in 2014 to combat all aspects of human trafficking, develop a comprehensive response, coordinate strategies to provide necessary services for victims, focus prevention efforts to end the demand for human trafficking and create awareness through education and community initiatives, and develop legislation to prevent, intervene and treat human trafficking. Its members include representatives of various law enforcement and state agencies.

For more information about human trafficking and the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force, go online to www.enditalabama.org.

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