



Guter: Resources needed to fight human trafficking

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Most Americans understand that slavery isn't just a problem in history. It persists, and its most common form today is human trafficking. Still, many Americans believe modern slavery afflicts only countries "over there."

"We think of human trafficking as a far-off problem in a third-world country," says U.S. Rep. John Culberson, a Republican who represents the Houston-area 7th Congressional District in Texas. "We can no longer do that: these are real victims suffering real harm at the hands of real criminals - and it's happening in our town."

The awareness among political leaders like Culberson has led to important new laws, like the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and its subsequent reauthorizations. Yet human trafficking remains the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world, raking in \$150 million in yearly profits. The International Labor Organization estimates that today there are 20.9 million trafficking victims in the world. Houston is located along Interstate 10, a main route for transporting human trafficking victims. More broadly, Texas is the second-highest in the nation for number of calls to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center.

Labor trafficking is more prevalent, but sex trafficking accounts for about two-thirds of the criminal profits, and an estimated 83 percent of sex trafficking victims in the United States are American citizens. Even more tragic, many victims of sex trafficking in the United States - half, according to some estimates - are children.

While there are various reasons for the growth of this horrific human rights problem, one stands out above the rest: insufficient government resources. The U.S. government spends more money in the War on Drugs in a month than it has spent combating trafficking in the last fifteen years. Worldwide all governments and NGOs, or non-governmental organizations, have spent an average of only \$124 million a year combined fighting trafficking.

With these limited funds, law enforcement agencies simply don't have the resources to crack down on traffickers, who operate with near impunity. According to the 2015 State Department Trafficking in Persons report, there were only 4,443 convictions for trafficking globally in 2014, and only 184 in the United States.

Services for victims are essential, but we also need to ensure that there are fewer victims. Unless we greatly heighten the legal risk for traffickers, they will continue to replace rescued victims with new ones.

Now the House subcommittee headed by Rep. Culberson has a chance to begin to set the U.S. government on a new course by appropriating sufficient funds for the Department of Justice's Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit. The centerpiece of the U.S. government's domestic anti-trafficking enforcement, the HTPU partners with police and prosecutors to coordinate investigations. Crucially, it also leads 12 Anti-trafficking Coordination Teams, which enhance collaborative efforts with the Departments of Homeland Security and Labor. The teams generated a 119 percent increase in investigations in their districts last year.

Over the past five years, the number of cases handled by the HTPU has increased by 62 percent. Yet funding from Congress has remained flat since 2010, at \$5.3 million. The HTPU reports that with just a modest increase in funding - \$2.8 million - it could increase the number of trafficking suspects charged by 49 percent. This would be a wise investment and a long overdue down payment on ending human slavery in our communities.

Thanks to the work of anti-trafficking advocates and their allies in Congress, we're beginning to understand what works in the fight against trafficking. The Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit works. I respectfully urge Rep. Culberson and his colleagues to give it the resources it needs to succeed.

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