



SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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For Immediate Release
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Statement of Representative Jerry O'Connor on Gov. Evers Signing Anti-Human Trafficking Bills

MADISON – Representative Jerry O'Connor (R- Fond du Lac) released the following statement after Governor Evers signed three bills recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking (AB 973, AB 976, and AB 978) into law.

“Human trafficking is a global crisis. It affects countless lives, including many individuals right here in Wisconsin. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, since the program's inception in 2007, Wisconsin has had 796 human-tracking cases involving 1,640 victims. While those statistics are striking, a 2019 DOJ study found that sex-trafficking data is under-reported, so the true number of victims is likely much higher.

Today I am proud to report that Gov. Evers signed three bipartisan bills recommended by the Speaker's Human Trafficking Task Force.

These bills are a product of the hearings held during the past four months where our Human Trafficking Task Force attempted to better understand how trafficking is affecting our society, especially young people. We learned from agency representatives, DOJ, County DA offices, multiple speakers from local law enforcement, and not-for-profit victim support organizations what a challenge it is to turn the tide of human trafficking in Wisconsin.

This exercise gave us a clear pathway to several bills we could introduce that would have an effective influence and help reduce the level of sex and child sex trafficking in Wisconsin. These bills were recommended by the Speaker's Human Trafficking Task Force in its bipartisan final report.

AB 973: Human Trafficking Training for Employees of At-Risk Businesses

One of the issues that was brought up on multiple occasions during our hearings is whether workers or clients of certain organizations, including community-based residential facilities, hotels, motels, public transit, adult entertainment establishments, and private security businesses, were being exploited for sex trafficking. Among these individuals are those people who could be targeted under the heading of “exploitation of the vulnerable” as a phrase coined by law enforcement.

The first step in preventing human trafficking is awareness education. The goal of this bill is to stop sex trafficking before it happens. To be successful toward that end it is incumbent on us to create a pattern where sex trafficking is recognized, identified, and stopped. Under AB 973 employees of businesses that come into contact with the public and vulnerable individuals will receive training on identifying and preventing human trafficking crimes

AB 976: Testimony of a Child in a Criminal Proceeding for a Human Trafficking Crime

Throughout our hearings, the Task Force found that many potential prosecutions of traffickers are derailed due to a lack of testimony from victims. If victims do not feel comfortable testifying, they are less likely to do so. Additionally, with over 70% of trafficking victims first starting as minors, prosecutions of traffickers often require testimony from trafficked victims under the age of 18.

AB 976 broadens existing safeguards, specifically for witnesses under 18 years old, in trafficking prosecutions. It grants the court the discretion to allow video testimony, offering enhanced protection for young witnesses. The goal of these additional protections is to shield victims from further emotional distress while also assisting prosecutors in holding their traffickers accountable and bringing them to justice.

AB 978: Creating a Statewide Human Trafficking Council

Time and time again throughout our hearings, we heard that there was not a central database or platform for sharing critical information that could benefit communication and awareness of human trafficking between agencies, law enforcement, and victim support organizations. A side effect of this status is that we do not have a clear handle on the activities related to trafficking that would allow us to better understand and target our efforts to turn the tide of trafficking in Wisconsin.

This bill creates a statewide Human Trafficking Council that brings together the key stakeholders of agency, law enforcement, and victim representation. If we are to better utilize our various resources then we need to access the data that will allow us to maximize our effectiveness in overcoming this challenge.

I thank Speaker Vos, Rep. Billings, Rep. Gundrum, Sen. James, Sen. Knodl, Sen. Wimberger, and the bills' bipartisan co-sponsors for their efforts to craft a bill that helps combat a critical issue. Secondly, thank you to Gov. Evers for signing the bills into law today. Finally, I thank the members of the Human Trafficking Task Force for their efforts this session as well as those in law enforcement and victim support organizations who are working tirelessly to combat human trafficking in our state.

While today's bill signings are a tremendous first step in addressing the problem of human trafficking in Wisconsin, there remains work to be done. The Legislature will continue to collaborate with law enforcement and community stakeholders to better combat human trafficking, including by holding traffickers accountable and protecting and caring for victims. Our work will not be done until all of the captives have been set free.

For details on the Task Force's full report, please visit our website at <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/committees/human-trafficking/>

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