



## Human Trafficking: Fighting Modern Day Slavery in Our Communities

Over the past few years, the Ohio Senate has fought to crack down on human trafficking. This growing criminal enterprise is an unfortunate reality here in Ohio and across the nation. It is believed that more than 1,000 Ohio children become victims of human trafficking each year. Predators target vulnerable people and profit by exploiting them for forced labor or commercial sex. The most common age in Ohio for children to become victims of trafficking is 13 years old.

This modern-day slavery violates the most basic human rights of its victims. **That is why the Ohio Senate has made it one of our top priorities to fight these heinous crimes and why we passed an important bill (S.B. 4) this year helping victims reclaim and rebuild their lives.**

Ohio's statewide fight against trafficking began in 2011 when Attorney General Mike DeWine convened the Human Trafficking Commission, and in 2012 Governor Kasich formed the Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force to gain a better understanding about this problem and how to best address it.

The Senate followed up with significant legislation designed to prevent human trafficking, protect victims and punish traffickers. In 2012, we passed House Bill 262, the Safe Harbor Act. The bill contained new laws that strengthened Ohio's efforts to catch offenders, toughened penalties for traffickers and provided protections for persons who have fallen victim to these types of crimes. Among other things, the bill also established a Victims of Human Trafficking Fund and required statistical data on human trafficking in Ohio to be collected and published annually.

In June 2014, we built on this progress with House Bill 130, the End Demand Act. This legislation attacked the demand side of human trafficking by strengthening penalties for "Johns," significantly increasing penalties for solicitation of a minor, and prohibiting the advertisement of massage and other services with the suggestion or promise of illegal sexual activity.

Through these efforts, we became better equipped to recognize the conditions under which people become involved in crimes such as prostitution. We also recognized that people often commit crimes related to their victimization. For example, victims of forced prostitution often also become addicted to drugs.

Sometimes, our legal system then harms these victims a second time, by charging them with prostitution and drug crimes. This brands them as criminals rather than treating them as the victims that they truly are. Under current law, a human trafficking victim's legal information is accessible as a court record even if the charges were dismissed. Thus, the potential exists for the victim to suffer further harm if that person's potential employer or landlord discovers the record as part of a routine background check.

The Senate is focused on correcting this flaw and giving victims a fresh start. Senate Bill 4 adds common sense to our justice system and gives victims of human trafficking the opportunity to rebuild their lives. This bill would allow a human trafficking survivor to request the expungement of their arrest record if that person's alleged crimes were a result of their victimization. It would also allow victims who were forced into prostitution to seek intervention in lieu of conviction in court.

In short, Senate Bill 4 would allow courts more options to aid victims. The bill would also make sure that courts have the flexibility to look at the facts of an individual case and determine the appropriate course of action, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. The Senate passed this legislation on May 17, 2017 with unanimous support, and it is now under consideration in the House of Representatives. If passed by the House, this bill will be an important next step in our quest to get justice for trafficking victims.

If you suspect trafficking, please call the National Human Trafficking Hotline Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888, or text "HELP" or "INFO" to 233733. It is a national, toll-free hotline, available to answer calls and texts and open investigations to help human trafficking victims get the assistance and justice they deserve. To learn more, visit [www.humantrafficking.ohio.gov](http://www.humantrafficking.ohio.gov).

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*From a column by Senate President Larry Obhof, July 2017.*