



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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ANTI TRAFFICKING LAW MERITS SUPPORT

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The principle of solidarity is a basic theme of Catholic social teaching. As the world becomes more interdependent, this principle reminds us that human beings everywhere share a common connection and mutual responsibility for each other's well being. Solidarity comes into play when our legislature considers laws that help combat national or global evils.

One such global evil is that of human trafficking.

Human trafficking involves using fraud, force, and coercion to sexually exploit or otherwise press into labor an unwilling person. Particularly common is the sexual exploitation of women and girls, whether in the prostitution, strip club, or pornography industries.

Globally, an estimated 700,000 people are victims of human trafficking, making it the third largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world after arms trafficking and drug dealing. In the United States, an estimated 17,500 men, women, and children are trafficked every year. While these victims are mostly hidden from view, domestic abuse shelters and advocates against sexual assault are seeing an increased number of requests for assistance.

In recent years, the Vatican and bishops around the world, along with other governments and human rights groups, have denounced the growing incidence of human trafficking.

The USCCB recently highlighted the scope and urgency of the problem in a September 12, 2007, statement issued by Bishop Gerald Barnes (Diocese of San Bernardino), the chair of the USCCB's Committee on Migration. Among other things, Bishop Barnes called on Catholics to educate themselves and others about the plight of trafficking victims, and to make parishes "centers for action to help identify survivors and provide them support." "As Catholic bishops," he concluded, "We pledge to use the resources of the church to help end this affliction. We also pledge to use our teaching authority to educate Catholics and others about human trafficking."

Since 2000, when the U.S. Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the federal government has recognized the scope of the problem and created a blueprint to combat it. Unfortunately, the Act did not receive adequate funding to properly implement it.

In the face of insufficient federal funding to combat this modern-day slavery, numerous states have passed their own laws to address the problem within their borders. To date, 35 states have anti-trafficking laws on their books.

Now it looks as though Wisconsin may do so as well.

Assembly Bill 544, authored by Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz (R-Menomonee Falls), Representative Frederick Kessler (D-Milwaukee), Senator Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend), and Senator Spenser Coggs (D-Milwaukee) takes a helpful step forward in responding to human trafficking.

Their bill would do the following:

1. Designate human trafficking as a felony.
2. Punish trafficking of an adult with a fine of up to \$100,000, imprisonment for up to 25 years, or both.
3. Punish trafficking of a child with a fine of up to \$100,000, imprisonment for up to 40 years, or both.
4. Ensure that victims of trafficking who are forced to commit a crime are protected from prosecution.
5. Permit a court to order restitution for the victim's transportation, housing, childcare, gross income provided in services, and relocation expenses (if necessary for the victim's safety).
6. Allow the state to revoke the business license or corporate charter of any business operating in the state that knowingly engages in human trafficking.
7. Direct the Department of Health and Family Services to provide emergency services or assistance to trafficking victims, subject to the availability of funds.
8. Require the state's Office of Justice Assistance to collect data on the number and nature of violations related to human trafficking.

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference has endorsed Assembly Bill 544. Catholics and others can bear important witness to the principle of solidarity by urging its passage before the legislature concludes its business next spring.