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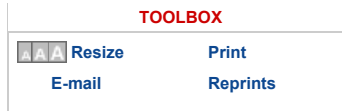
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Anti-Human Trafficking Bill Would Send FBI Agents on Trail of Pimps

By Jerry Markon
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Thursday, November 29, 2007



Local vice police officers, who for decades have led the law-enforcement crackdown on prostitution, could soon have unwilling partners: FBI agents.

The Justice Department is fighting legislation that would expand federal law to cover prostitution cases, saying that the move would divert agents from human trafficking crimes. Although local police still would handle the vast majority of cases, Justice officials said the law's passage would force them to bring cases in federal courts as well.

Some anti-trafficking activists and members of Congress say the federal government should be involved in policing prostitution. Prostitution is a social evil, they say, and increased law enforcement can only help the campaign against it.

"It's mind-boggling that the Justice Department would be fighting" the bill, said Dorchen Leidholdt, a founding board member of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, an activist group pushing the change. "They have the power to pick and choose the cases they want to prosecute. They don't have to prosecute local pimps if they don't want to."

The new provision is part of a bill reauthorizing the federal human trafficking statute, which passed Congress in 2000 and helped trigger a worldwide fight against what many consider modern-day slavery. The House Foreign Affairs Committee this month approved the legislation, which has bipartisan support and is expected to be taken up by the full House next week. Its prospects in the Senate are unclear.

The battle against trafficking is a major priority for the Bush administration, which is attacking it with 10 federal agencies reporting to a Cabinet-level task force chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. But there has been heated debate, even among the dozens of organizations fighting trafficking in the United States, over whether prostitutes should be considered trafficking victims.

Federal officials define trafficking as holding someone in a workplace through force, fraud or coercion, elements that are required to prove a trafficking case under federal law, other than in cases involving minors. Trafficking generally takes two forms, forced sex or labor. But some activists argue that all prostitutes, even those not forced to turn tricks, should be defined as trafficking victims and their pimps subject to federal prosecution.

The debate over the bill comes amid broader questions over how many victims are trafficked into the United States. The government estimated in 1999 that about 50,000 slaves were arriving in the country every year. That estimate was revised downward in 2004 to 14,500 to 17,500 a year. Yet since 2000, and despite 42 Justice Department task forces and more than \$150 million in federal dollars to find them, about 1,400 people have been certified as human trafficking victims in this country, a tiny fraction of the original estimates.

The House legislation cites the government's current estimate of up to 17,500 victims a year, but the Justice Department, in a Nov. 9 letter to congressional leaders, "questions the reliability" of the numbers. "Such findings, without a full body of evidence, are counter-productive," the letter says.

The letter also expresses opposition to the provision that Justice officials said would expand federal jurisdiction to cover prostitution offenses, which the department calls unnecessary and "a diversion from Federal law enforcement's core anti-trafficking mission." A senior Justice official, who was not authorized to speak for the record, reiterated the department's opposition yesterday.

"Prostitution is abhorrent, but state and local law enforcement officials already do an excellent job fighting it," he said.

Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney (D-N.Y.) said yesterday that she strongly supports the bill. "We want to crack down on sex trafficking, and DOJ can allocate its resources to go after the most serious cases," she said.

But Jack McDevitt, an associate dean in Northeastern University's College of Criminal Justice, who has studied local law enforcement's response to trafficking, said the Justice Department's concerns are warranted.

"Cases in local prostitution and pimping are better handled by local law enforcement, which have the contacts in the community and are going to find more intelligence about these crimes," he said. "Every major police department in the United States has had a vice unit for the past 50 years."

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