

## Florida: Sun, fun...and human trafficking

By  
Communication

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Officials in Orlando and Miami earlier this week voted to require massage parlors and strip clubs to post signs aimed at raising awareness of human trafficking.

The signs will read:

*If you or someone you know is being forced to engage in an activity and cannot leave, whether it is prostitution, house work, farm work, factory work, retail work, restaurant work or any other activity, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline.*

The awareness campaign underscores the severity of human trafficking in Florida. So far in 2015, 191 cases of suspected human trafficking have been reported in Florida, according to the [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#). Only two other states had more – California, with 477, and Texas, with 214.

The number of suspected cases is based on calls or tips to the resource center and other hotlines.

“The reason we are the third largest in tips reported in the nation is because we’ve done a really good job at bringing awareness to this issue so people know what to look for and when they see something they go ahead and call in the tip,” says Dotti Skipper, a member of Florida’s Statewide Council on Human Trafficking (See council’s [annual report](#)). Skipper got involved in human trafficking issues 30 years ago. She had been teaching a self-esteem class for girls from age 8 to 14. She had a difficult 13-year-old who was disruptive in class.

“She asked if she could bring her 4-year-old sister with her to our next class. And I said yes. And when she brought her in, I knew, I knew, I knew. Something in my gut wasn’t right.”

She soon learned that the grandmother of both girls was selling them for sex on the streets every night in exchange for drugs.

“This just plucked a string in my heart,” Skipper said. “I felt like I needed to rise up and help those who felt like they have no voice.”

On Oct. 29, Skipper joined Attorney General Pam Bondi at the Statewide Human Trafficking Summit in Tampa, Florida.



Bondi has been working since 2012 to help make Florida a zero-tolerance state for sex trafficking. She chairs the 15-member Statewide Council on Human Trafficking. It was created to support human trafficking victims, enhance care options and pass legislation, according to Bondi spokesman Gerald Ray. Council responsibilities include:

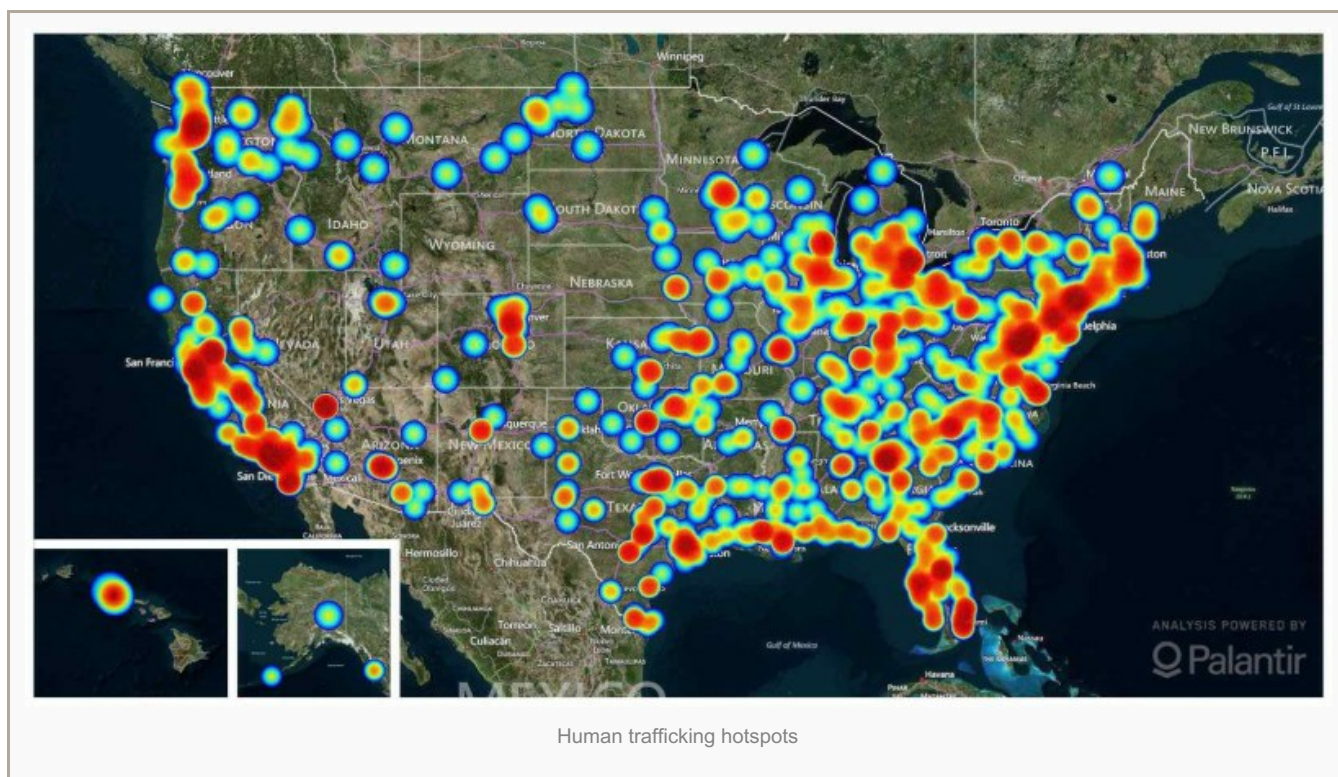
- Developing recommendations for certification of safe houses and safe foster homes;
- Making recommendations on apprehension and prosecution of traffickers;
- Holding an annual statewide policy summit with an institution of higher learning;
- Working with the Department of Children and Families to create and maintain an inventory of human trafficking programs and services within the state.

“I think we can always do more, but I am very, very encouraged at the progress that we have made over the last two to three years in particular,” Skipper said. “In fact, we are kind of looked at as the leaders in this area with some of the legislation that we’ve passed that help the victim and survivor with resources. We have a long way to go. There’s still not enough housing, still not enough wrap around services with all the services that are needed but we are really doing our best in Florida to tackle that.”

Dozens of people were arrested this fall in human trafficking crackdowns in Florida and other states in the South. A Sept. 15 [indictment](#) in Panama City, Florida, charged nine people with trafficking Hispanic women for prostitution. The defendants operated out of homes in Panama City and Pensacola and referred to their female victims as “meat,” according to the indictment.

On Oct. 13, the FBI announced that it had rescued 149 sexually exploited children and arrested more than 150 pimps and other individuals, including 25 people in Jacksonville, as part of [Operation Cross Country](#).

“Our mission is to protect the American people—especially our children—from harm,” FBI Director James Comey said in a statement.



In 2012, the Florida State Legislature has passed a law that increases penalties for the crime of human smuggling from a first-degree misdemeanor to a third-degree felony, ensuring that those convicted of human sex trafficking be designated as sex offenders and sex predators.

Since then, Florida has seen an increase in human trafficking cases, Ray said. The Office of Statewide Prosecution, he explained, has prosecuted 14 individuals in complex cases spanning multiple judicial circuits. Nine trafficking

cases are ongoing and 47 defendants are awaiting trial.

Skipper says she doesn't pay attention to statistics. She's concerned about the victims.

"I tend to stay away from statistics because statistics change and can be manipulated to be used pro or con in a certain way," she said. "What I do know is Tampa is a hot destination place, not only for sex trafficking, but for labor trafficking and it's because of our beaches, our weather, our seaport and airport, and military base that we have here. I think one of the largest reasons is because Hillsborough County in Tampa has one of the largest adult entertainment industries in the nation."

Skipper is the founder of the [HeartDance Foundation](#), a ministry that helps victims and survivors of sex trafficking. It touts itself as a place that is nonjudgmental, a place where survivors can talk about what they have been through.

Skipper also works with strip club employees to spread awareness about sex trafficking.

"I've had my ministry for about eight years and we go into clubs and just let the beautiful women know that they are a great dignity and great value and great worth. Because they do not want to be there, from my experience, and 100 percent of the women that we've worked with in the clubs were sexually abused as children so that's definitely a common denominator.

"We also know that strip clubs are grooming grounds for traffickers for them to train their product, for a lack of better words. The women will reach out to us where we can help them figure out how to get their GED, how to find another job and just be a support group and system to them where they feel like someone cares about them and that they don't feel like they're just thrown away people. We surround them and let them know that they're not, and that there is a network of people out there that can help them," said Skipper, who is also human trafficking coordinator the Salvation Army in Florida.

Another group that is fighting trafficking is Club Operators Against Sex Trafficking, or COAST.

The Ace National Association of Club Executives founded it in 2010 to help educate strip club employees and managers about different signs of sex trafficking.

COAST has cooperated with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security for the past four years. The idea is that club employees act as "eyes and ears," watching for potential sex trafficking cases.

"COAST is a two-way street. They give us access to an audience that we've never had before, meaning they give us access to the entertainers of the different clubs," says Special Agent Bill Williger of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

"We've been able to raise awareness with the entertainers that we have come in contact with. We've changed their view of law enforcement as we're not there to hustle them because that's their chosen profession. We are there to help them out if something goes wrong in their chosen profession.

"Believe it or not, we actually get people who walk in off the street and give us great information about things that they've witnessed."

Many challenges remain, including "keeping our victims in a safe place and even finding proper housing or counseling," says Shannon Kasperek, a detective at the Clearwater Police Department.

"But I definitely think the biggest obstacle is having the proper resources to be able to take care of the victims," she said.

Many victims get hooked on drugs, then engage in prostitution to pay for their habit.

In one notorious case, a man named Andrew Fields gave prescription painkillers to women he advertised on



Craigslist. They went into debt with Fields and carried out sex acts to pay him back.

“It was a case where he was luring in these young girls and started selling them drugs and then when they couldn’t afford the drugs anymore, he started prostituting them,” Skipper said. “It was just a big case and there were many victims in this case and he went down for 60 years in prison. This gentleman was already 60 years old, so he is in prison for life.”




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Williger was one of the lead investigators in the Fields case. He said when they searched Fields trailer, they found almost 9,000 prescription pills.

“For a long time, the things that we saw with the victims were very violent but over the course of time the cases have

become less and less violent and have started relying on different means to control the victims,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve worked a case in the last five or six years where prescription co-addictions didn’t play a very large role in controlling or coercing the victims.”

“For me, the Andrew Fields case stands out in my mind a lot just because one of our victims. She was 17 when she got started, but we couldn’t find the evidence to corroborate with that. When we recovered her, she had only been in the game for about a year and a half, so she was 19.

“She was injecting anywhere between 20 to 30 Oxys (OxyContin) a day and was shooting into the veins that came off of her nipple on her chest and she wound up, as a result of her trafficking and her pill addiction, with MRSA (Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, a serious infection or super bug that is resistant to antibiotics).

“Her teeth rotted out. Our NGOs found a dentist that would do the dental work for free on her and wound up pulling all but four teeth. He left her four best teeth for something to anchor the dentures to,” says Williger.

Skipper said the case upset her.

“It was a really huge case involving manipulation and power and control of drugs, addicting women so that he could sell them for sex. This impacted me greatly. I had the opportunity to go sit in the courtroom and Homeland Security asked me if I could come to the witness room and pray with the survivors before they went on the stand and that was an incredible experience so that truly has impacted me greatly.”

But she’s optimistic and says awareness of human trafficking continues to grow.

“So I think we’re progressing. We have a ways to go, but we’re better than where we were even three years ago.”

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