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Senate ‘package’ deals with a different transportation issue: Human trafficking

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Three Washington State Senate bills aim to increase awareness of human trafficking and help agencies coordinate efforts to confront the problem.

Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, D-Seattle, in her proposal would require anti-trafficking information to be posted in all public restrooms, including in private businesses.

A notice would be created by the state’s Office of Crime Victims Advocacy with input from businesses and anti-trafficking advocacy groups. Costs of printing and distributing the notices to businesses, under Senate Bill 5883, would be covered by anti-trafficking non-profit organizations.

The posters would list a hotline number for the [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#), which provides mental health, counseling, legal and referral services for victims.

Stephanie Martinez, advocacy manager at Seattle Against Slavery, said Washington is among the states with the highest per-capita call volume, citing the national resource center’s statistics. In 2013 the center received 500 calls from within the state of Washington.

“Posters with online numbers are one of the top 10 ways people call the center for services,” she said. “Mandatory-post laws and targeted campaigns significantly affect increasing call volume.”

Another Kohl-Welles proposal uses a direct approach to combat human trafficking.

Under Senate Bill 5884, Washington’s Office of Crime Victims Advocacy would create a website—Washington State Clearinghouse on Human Trafficking—to gather information on anti-trafficking efforts around the state.

“It’s been recommended that we have a single point in state government to coordinate everything because we have many new bills that are being directed to various agencies in our state,” Kohl-Welles said.

Statewide task-force reports, a directory of services for trafficking victims and other state and federal information would be gathered for the website.

This bill would re-establish a statewide human trafficking task force and re-authorize the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Coordinating Committee through June 30, 2017. The

committee makes recommendations and presents data analysis of current efforts against the commercial sexual exploitation of youth.

Nicholas Oakley of the Center for Children and Youth Justice said the committee is made up of representatives from a number of law enforcement and agencies that serve youth, and serves as an information resource for legislators.

“At minimal cost to the state, this bill would go a long way to addressing sex trafficking of youth because it harnesses the power of an already successful public-private partnership,” he said.

The Center for Children and Youth Justice aims to coordinate statewide efforts to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and juvenile sex trafficking, which Oakley defines as the trade, profit and exploitation of children for sexual purposes.

Rebecca Podszus, program specialist for policy and government affairs at the state Attorney General’s Office, said the clearinghouse website is an important resource. “It allows advocates, grassroots and other government organizations to have a good, reliable place to go for information about what’s going on in anti-trafficking efforts throughout the state.”

The Office of Crime Victims Advocacy would also provide administrative support for the Washington State Task Force on the Trafficking of Persons, which is composed of 17 appointed representatives, including the attorney general, the superintendent of public instruction and the director of Washington’s Department of Agriculture.

The task force would evaluate the state’s trafficking-prevention progress, identify local, state and federal victims’ services and make recommendations for improvements.

Senate Bill 5933, sponsored by Sen. Steve O’Ban, R-University Place, and co-sponsored by Kohl-Welles and Sen. Joe Fain, directs the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy to establish a training program for criminal justice staff around the state who investigate, prosecute and adjudicate human trafficking crimes.

Rose Gundersen, executive director of Washington Engage, a statewide organization seeking to prevent sex and labor trafficking, said there is no system in place now to ensure law enforcement officers receive training in the state’s anti-trafficking laws.

“We need to build local accountability to make sure training will be enforced and that it’s sustainable,” she said.

A substitute 5933 bill introduced on Feb. 19 in the Senate Committee on Law and Justice seeks to expand the training to encourage coordination among criminal justice personnel, build cultural competency and develop understanding of the diverse populations affected by human trafficking.

The Office of Crime Victims Advocacy would also be responsible for providing a biennial report on the training and its outcomes.

All three bills are awaiting movement to the full Senate for consideration in the Senate Rules Committee.