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McCain, Heitkamp speak about human trafficking in Bismarck

By [Andrew Scheeler / Bismarck Tribune](#) on Jun 27, 2015 at 7:28 a.m.

BISMARCK — Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D., and anti-human trafficking advocate Cindy McCain met in Bismarck Friday with more than 30 law enforcement officials, victim advocates, victim service providers and health care providers.

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Prior to the roundtable discussion, Heitkamp and McCain discussed the reason for McCain's visit.

McCain, co-founder of the McCain Institute and wife of 2008 Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has become an outspoken advocate of human trafficking victims, particularly children.

At the roundtable, McCain said that when she first spoke out on human trafficking, people didn't take her seriously. She said her hometown newspaper told her that she didn't know what she was talking about.

McCain said her efforts are intended to raise public awareness of the signs of human trafficking.

"Everybody has seen it, they just didn't know what they were looking at," McCain said.

Heitkamp called it a misconception to view pimps as small-time entrepreneurs, saying that the same vast criminal organizations that deal in drugs and weapons also are selling women and children against their will.

"Make no mistake, this is organized," Heitkamp said.

She spoke of visiting the McCain Institute and speaking with a researcher from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, DARPA, who tracks online ads advertising trafficked women and girls.

Heitkamp said the researcher pulled her aside and told her that he observed a "spike" in North Dakota that showed no indication of coming down.

At Friday's roundtable discussion, McCain and Heitkamp heard from several parties involved in addressing human trafficking in North Dakota, including Janelle Moos, with the Council on Abused Women's Services North Dakota; Christina Sambor, with A Force to End Human Sexual Exploitation, or FUSE; and former U.S. Attorney for North Dakota Timothy Purdon.

Sambor also led the roundtable through a presentation highlighting the recent changes to human trafficking laws enacted by the North Dakota Legislature, which become effective Aug. 1. Those changes include clearer definitions, stiffer sentences and more legal protection for victims of human trafficking.

Despite the progress made in North Dakota, and nationwide through a federal anti-human trafficking act recently signed into law by the president, Heitkamp and McCain said there was much more work to be done.

In North Dakota, one of the problems raised by both Heitkamp and others was a lack of support infrastructure and resources for victims of human trafficking. One area in particular where services are lacking are for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youths, who make up a disproportionate number of runaways who, in turn, Heitkamp said make up a disproportionate number of those who end up as trafficking victims.

The senator expressed frustration that the Senate excised anti-discrimination language from the human trafficking act it passed and vowed to continue fighting for such protections to be included.

“When kids feel marginalized, like they don’t have value, those are the kids who get targeted,” Heitkamp said.

Heitkamp and McCain are expected to continue touring western North Dakota, with stops Saturday in Parshall and Williston and a stop Sunday in Watford City.