

# Identifying human trafficking in Texas schools



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The second period bell rings at La Joya High School on a typical Tuesday morning. School district police Chief Raul Gonzalez shakes a few students' hands as he stands vigilant for any signs of possible human trafficking as hundreds of students file past him down the hall.

“Sometimes we have kids who are misbehaving and we don't know the underlying factors,” Gonzalez said. “It's important that we are informed about the reality of what's happening with our kids and that they could be recruited for human trafficking.”

Last year, the Texas Education Agency launched the new RISE program to educate teachers and school staff members to identify signs of human trafficking. In it, the program teaches educators to: Recognize risk factors, Identify potential victims and report it; Share knowledge with colleges, parents and community members; and Engage in local prevention efforts.

“Most schools are equipped to handle various security issues; however, human trafficking is an emerging threat to our schools,” Katherine Wise, spokeswoman for the Texas Attorney General's Office which leads the state's Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force, said in an email.

The task force was established in September 2009 by House Bill 4009, which aimed at developing policies and procedures to assist in the prevention and prosecution of human trafficking crimes.

There are nearly 50 stakeholders on the task force and over 400 workgroup members. HB 1272 extended the task force in 2013 and placed the requirement to work with TEA to develop educational materials for education professionals.

In a national effort to document human trafficking, the FBI will be publishing reports involving human trafficking cases for the first time in this year's Uniform Crime Reports. No preliminary data is available but in 2013 there were 13 states reporting this information to the FBI already and Texas was not one of them.

## TRAFFICKING DEFINED

Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery that affects millions of victims all around the world. In the United States it is estimated that 100,000 children are in the sex trade but no official numbers exist to measure the scope of this multibillion dollar industry growing every year, according to statistics from the NationalHumanTraffickingResourceCenter.

In Texas, there were over 2,000 reports of possible human trafficking to the center last year. Sometimes confused with human smuggling, trafficking is a crime against a person that is either being coerced into forced labor or commercial sex acts for their captors' personal gain. On the other hand, smuggling is a crime against a country and involves entry into the country without coercion.

But smuggling can become trafficking if the victim is exploited after crossing the border.

There are two kinds of human trafficking: labor and sex trafficking. Labor trafficking victims are often found working with little or no pay in industries such as manual labor, agricultural and restaurants. Sex trafficking victims are often discovered working at escort services, residential brothels and bars, according to the center.

An example used in the RISE training program was a 2010 case involving a bar in Mission where three underage sisters were being coerced into having sex with customers after being smuggled into the country illegally.

Beleal Garcia-Gonzalez, the bar owner, told the three sisters from Honduras they had to pay back their debt for smuggling them into the United States and threatened to hurt their family. The three sisters were later rescued after a tip led Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to the El Paraiso bar, court documents state.

The bar owner is serving a 30-year sentence for three counts of sex trafficking of children and one count of conspiracy to harbor illegal aliens.

To report human trafficking, contact the NationalHumanTraffickingResourceCenter is (888) 373-7888 FREE.

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