



Florida's congressional delegation holds hearing on human trafficking

By Staff Report

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Florida's congressional delegation held a meeting Wednesday in Washington, D.C., to discuss the growing problem of human trafficking in the state.

Florida ranks third in the nation, behind California and Texas, in the number of reported trafficking cases and experienced a 54 percent increase last year, U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan's office noted in a news release. Children account for more than half the cases of human trafficking, a crime in which the victim is abducted or recruited for sexual exploitation. It can also involve illegal organ harvesting and forced labor.

The delegation heard from several Florida experts on trafficking, including Elizabeth Fisher, the founder and head of Selah Freedom, a national anti-sex trafficking nonprofit based in Sarasota. Fisher briefed the delegation on her group's efforts to help more than 2,000 young women in the Southwest Florida area, the news release said.

Fisher said Congress should focus on providing the resources to help victims reclaim their lives and that demand for services is tripling annually.

"Human trafficking is a vile and monstrous crime against women and children," said Buchanan, who chaired the delegation meeting. "Unfortunately, Florida is a hub for human trafficking and that's why we must do all we can to stop this crime."

In November 2016, a Sarasota man was sentenced to 50 years in prison for human trafficking after authorities said he "groomed and coached the victim on how to trade her body for money and drugs on the streets of Sarasota."

Four other panelists discussed human trafficking in Florida, including Special Agent Jose Ramirez, of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement; Bethany Gilot, the statewide human trafficking director for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice; Michelle Guelbart, director for private sector engagement for the anti-child sex trafficking nonprofit ECPAT-USA; and Suzanne Harrison, director of clinical programs, professor and education director for family medicine with the Florida State University College of Medicine.

“We need to have the public understand that this is a public health issue. Victims go unrecognized in clinics and emergency rooms,” Harrison said.

Rep. Tom Rooney, whose district includes part of Sarasota County, was among the Florida delegation at the meeting.

Buchanan is among the co-sponsors of the Abolish Human Trafficking Act, which increases penalties for perpetrators and gives law enforcement more tools to treat human trafficking like organized crime. He also supported the Put Trafficking Victims First Act, a bill that would provide federal grants to train prosecutors and law enforcement on how to best protect victims and investigate, prosecute and prevent human trafficking. It also would provide assistance for trauma care and mental health services to victims. The bill is pending in the Senate.