

# **Analysis: Churches, ministries provide refuge to victims of human trafficking**

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Many Christians see the eradication of human trafficking in the United States as a complex and daunting problem. But that doesn't mean they are letting the enormity of the challenge scare them away.

During the last session of the Texas Legislature, Christians across denominations united to support bills in the Texas House and Senate that increase penalties for human traffickers and raise fines up to \$10,000 if the victim of forced labor or forced sexual acts is a child.



Laws are being created, changed and implemented in efforts to rescue victims and punish traffickers and men who solicit women sold into prostitution.

However, many trafficked victims search in vain for a place of refuge. The current state budget in Texas does not fund the creation of safe houses.

Hope for a safe house depends on the private sector. Churches are

stepping up to answer the call in Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

One East Texas congregation, [First Baptist Church in Palestine](#), has plans in place to launch a place of refuge for trafficking victims within the next few months.

"The role of the church is about setting people free. That's what we do. We talk a lot of times about people being set free spiritually, but we also proclaim release of the captives, just like Jesus said. So we want to be a part of doing that," Pastor Jay Abernathy said.

Norma Millican and Missy Zivney, members of First Baptist Church in Palestine, founded [Refuge of Light](#)—an organization that focuses on restoring the lives of human trafficking victims. They plan to open a shelter for victims in the relatively near future.

"Our goal is to provide a safe environment for these victimized minor girls to heal and transition into a new life, equipped with the skills to allow them a successful future within society," Millican said.

While First Baptist Church in Palestine is focusing on aftercare, Lory Mercer, founder of [Cornerstone Children's Ranch](#), is addressing the issue from the side of prevention. The ranch in Quemado, less than two miles from the Texas/Mexico border in Southwest Texas, got its start acting as a center for relief work in Mexico and missionaries across the border.

Due to the emerging situation along the Texas-Mexico border, the ranch expanded to develop its Children Caught in the Gap ministry. Specifically, Cornerstone seeks to reach out to U.S.-born children with undocumented parents who are at risk of falling into patterns of trafficking.

If their parents are deported, these children face an uncertain future,

either in Mexico or the United States. In Mexico, foreign-born children must pay to continue their studies after sixth grade.

Mercer has seen the vulnerability of children who are "caught in the gap."

"There comes a time when parents can no longer financially sustain their children. So, they tell their children to come to the U.S. and find jobs because they are citizens. This is an open door to exploitation for these minor children," she said.

Parents end up entrusting their children to a coyote or smuggler, an even more uncertain move.

Children who successfully return to the United States generally end up with low-paying jobs or rely on the welfare system. In an effort to prevent children from becoming victims of child labor and/or trafficking, Cornerstone Children's Ranch is implementing a new sponsorship program.

The program has begun unofficially with three young girls under its care. Cornerstone is raising funds to expand its current lodging facilities and open the door for more children waiting to come under its guardianship.

The Children Caught in the Gap program serves these children by providing lodging, sending them to school and helping them set goals for themselves while instilling in them Christian values. The children can go back to visit their family members in Mexico during school holidays and vacations.

Investing up to 18 years in the lives of these children proves its worth when they, in return, grow up to be contributing citizens and Christian leaders who pay their taxes and give back to their country, Cornerstone officials noted.

The ministry hopes to expand to operate its own school and eventually serve as a boarding school instead of foster care for these children. Communication with their parents would be maintained.

"We are willing to care for these children and act as their guardian, until they finish school, in hopes that we grow and educate children that will be an asset to this the country of their birth," Mercer said.