

Capitol rally urges end to human trafficking

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AUSTIN—Lawmakers across party lines joined members of the faith community and other advocates for children and young women at a rally on the steps of the Texas Capitol calling for an end to human trafficking.



Ross Chandler, pastor of First Baptist Church in Marble Falls, prays at rally in Austin designed to raise awareness about human trafficking. Bob Sanborn (left), president and CEO of Children at Risk, was one of the rally organizers. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Ross Chandler, pastor of First Baptist Church in Marble Falls, offered the invocation at the Jan. 22 event, co-sponsored by about a dozen groups including the Texas Baptist [Christian Life Commission](#).

Chandler interceded for the estimated 78,000 vulnerable children and teenagers who are victimized by traffickers.

“We cannot live in peace as long as they are suffering,” he prayed.

Bob Sanborn, president and chief executive officer of [Children at Risk](#), a Houston-based advocacy group, noted 35,000 children attend Texas schools within 1,000 feet of illicit massage businesses, which often operate as fronts for human trafficking.

Sanborn led participants in a chant frequently repeated at the rally, “Stop trafficking now!”



Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, urged fellow lawmakers to address “the demand side” of sex trafficking. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, voiced support for legislation to train classroom teachers and public school administrators to recognize signs of trafficking, as well as initiatives to address the “demand side” of sex trafficking.

“I want (buyers) to feel the pressure. I want them to feel the

embarrassment,” she said.

Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano, told the crowd he had filed HB 934, legislation that would make it a second-degree felony, punishable by up to 20 years in prison, to engage the services of a prostitute who is a victim of sex trafficking.



Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano, called the fight against human trafficking “a spiritual battle.”
(Photo / Ken Camp)

“This is a spiritual battle,” Shaheen said. He noted the Bible commands “God’s people ... to give voice to the voiceless,” particularly vulnerable children.

While human trafficking is a \$32 billion business globally, it also is a huge criminal enterprise in Texas, and lawmakers need to address the problem in those terms, said Ana Hernandez, D-Houston.

“We are going after them and hitting them where it hurts—in their pocketbooks,” Hernandez said.

Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, drew cheers from the crowd when she announced the Texas Senate's proposed budget includes \$89 million for trafficking prevention and prosecution—a \$64 million increase from the previous legislative session.

Huffman described efforts to end human trafficking both in terms of a journey and a battle.

“This is a nonpartisan fight,” she said. “We are all in this together.”

Rep. Ted Parker, R-Flower Mound, called the prevalence of human trafficking in Texas “a mark of shame on our state.”

Pointing out children in foster care disproportionately are victimized by human trafficking, Rep. Rick Miller, R-Sugar Land, stressed the need for evidence-based trauma-informed training for all Child Protective Services workers and others in the foster care system.

As elected officials spoke, advocates held signs saying “People are not for sale,” “She could be your daughter” and “Free Mia”—a teenager in the foster care system who became a human trafficking victim. She was named as lead plaintiff on behalf of 12,000 children in the foster care system in a 2014 class-action lawsuit.

The day before the Austin rally, about 40 volunteers gathered at the Dallas Baptist Association office for a Martin Luther King Day service project as part of the association's anti-trafficking initiative. Volunteers filled gift bags with feminine hygiene products and other items the Rockwall-based Poiema Foundation will provide to trafficking survivors.

They also viewed an informational video for churches about human trafficking in the Dallas area. The association produced the “Hear Their Cry” video with funds made possible through the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions.