

Testimony of Adrian Garcia

Sheriff

Harris County, Texas

“Combatting Human Trafficking In Our Major Cities”

March 20, 2014

Thank you, members of Congress, for inviting me to testify today about a subject that I have placed at the forefront of my crime-fighting efforts. I give special thanks to you, Chairman McCaul, for working with me over the years – not only to serve Harris County well, but specifically to put a spotlight on human trafficking and to develop an effective strategic plan that should include legislative action, federal resources, Public-Private-Partnerships, public education and awareness, and law enforcement that we need in our metropolis to bring this horrible industry to an end. Here in Harris County, I know that our cooperative efforts will continue to serve as a model for others to follow.

As a life-long Houstonian, I am grateful for today’s discussion on Human Trafficking because it has been in our mist here in the Houston/Harris County area in some form or another for many years, just as it has been in other parts of our state and country. However, it is hearings such as this that create the opportunity to work on a united front to save victims from slavery; regardless of whether the victim is a female or male; regardless of it is internationally or domestically driven; regardless of whether the victims are in this country without the proper permission; regardless if the victims are cleaning, repairing or building our homes or businesses; regardless if the victims are giving manicures or washing dishes at some local establishment; or regardless if they have been forced into sex slavery.

This hearing will afford us the opportunity to have a clear discussion as to how prevalent human trafficking is affecting our community, and what needs to be done to address it.

For example:

- Harris County’s economic capacity attracts newcomers from across the nation and around the world. So new faces are not unusual here but sometimes people who look like willing visitors are here under duress and in places that we may naturally suspect, as well as in places that we have never thought to suspect.

- Harris County's profile is much different today than it was in 1959 when my parents left Mexico City to make Houston our home. Today, we are proud of the title of being considered one of the most internationally diverse cities in America! It is important that a global economy be a part of our profile, unfortunately there are enterprising persons want to exploit our diversity at the cost of human tragedy, and use our diversity to hide their evil activities.
- With a culture of tolerance and diversity, our airports and the Port provide gateways to and from around the globe, so in Harris County we speak over a 100 languages every day and we come in all colors. We will continue to welcome those who want to make a contribution to our community or visit lawfully, but we must also remember that there are victims amongst us who are here illegally because of lure or force, in either case they are victims.
- Because of the sheer size of our population and land mass, young runaways from down the road or three states away may not raise eyebrows when they arrive here looking to blend into our communities. As a result, it is important to recognize that we not only have international victims of human trafficking but we have victims of human trafficking that are born right here in the USA.

This is why I have said many times that human trafficking can hide in plain sight in Harris County. But if the eyes of local law enforcement were ever closed to this, they certainly are not now, at least not within the Harris County Sheriff's Office. Through the saturation of our mobile phone app "I Watch Harris County", we want people to know that we are watching for human trafficking and other crimes and we need them to do so as well!

The Harris County Sheriff's Office takes a multi-pronged approach to fighting along this crucial battlefield:

- First, we work as integral part of the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance, in which our partners are the Houston Police Department and the FBI, and the cases often involve traffickers whose operations cross state or national borders. As a former federal prosecutor, you are aware how long and complicated these investigations are and that is why in spite of our efforts, the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance has only been able to prosecute 75 people on charges of human trafficking and related crimes since 2006.

As the Sheriff of Harris County I must state that if we believe there are more victims and traffickers amongst us, then we must commit more resources and broaden our strategy and not be happy with what we are able to do with what we have available. If there is a

victim listening to our testimony, I want them to know that we are trying to find them, help them, and put their pimps in state or federal prison. But this does require more resources.

- Secondly, we work in the unincorporated area of Harris County, in the streets, in the hotsheet motels and on illicit web sites, sometimes undercover, to bust prostitutes, their customers and their pimps. Prior to my administration in 2008, the Harris County Sheriff's Office only had 6 deputies dealing with vice issues; all of these deputies were males. Today, we have increased that number to 12 deputies to address game rooms and prostitution and of these deputies, seven are females. I point this out because for too many years we have been effective at arresting mainly female prostitutes. Women, who I do not believe grew up with the dream of becoming a prostitute on the streets of Harris County, rather they are women or in many cases children who have been exploited for someone else's gain. For that reason, empowered these female deputies to go after those men, who want to buy women like cheap property. I have charged these female deputies with giving those men a feel of the shackles that these women have endured for so many years.

- Thirdly, I advocate on behalf of those who work with the victims of human trafficking. The Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance has rescued more than 230 local victims since its inception, and those victims need resources and support, and that why I applaud groups like:
 - "Free the Captives" led by a powerhouse of Julie Waters,
 - "Tahirih (Ta-ha-ray) Justice Center" led by another dynamic woman, Anne Chandler
 - "Force for Compassion" led by the dynamic duo of Jana Rankin and Jackelyn Iloff
 - "Redeemed Ministries" led by the fearless, Dennis Mark.

These groups are stepping up to help and do what they can in this fight. However, these groups are overwhelmed and the victims need many services like shelters, legal counsel and other resources to help them in their recovery.

- Also, I have leveraged technology like the "Been Missing" website and mobile app to our efforts to recover run-aways and missing persons who have disappeared from our community and may be under the control of pimps or drug dealers.

- I have also increased the knowledge of all my staff, deputies and our professional detention officers, on the elements of human trafficking so that we can do better at recognizing it.

Although we have made progress, I ask for your help in creating a greater awareness to this terrible industry. Whenever the Harris County Sheriff's Office announces the results of an undercover "sting" operation against prostitution, some members of the community consider prostitution a victimless crime and urge us to use our resources to stamp out violent crimes, drug trafficking and thefts. I need your help to remind the public that there is a common thread that runs through all of these crimes, because rarely does any one of these criminal enterprises stand alone. Each fuels the other and anytime we can disrupt one criminal enterprise it affects the others.

To those who think prostitution is a victimless crime: Help remind them that it's a greedy industry that thrives on forced labor, drug addiction and sometimes even illegal imprisonment. Many who have come through the Harris County Jail, arrested as prostitutes, tell us they were turned onto illegal drugs and were then forced into prostitution to finance their addictions. Still others tell us they were trapped in servitude, unable to access food and medicine, or even their choice of clothing.

So we need to remind folks that stopping prostitution stops other crimes, emancipates victims and fights back against human trafficking. This also explains why we give the news media the mug shots of the men and women we arrest. We are trying to deter the next set of customers and suppliers. We are attacking human trafficking at the roots.

In addition, I want to thank the Texas Legislature and Harris County Commissioners Court, because last year we got new regulations against wayward Sexually Oriented Business. Although, SOBs are legal, we can now take them down if they fail to comply with county licensing requirements. Some SOBs engender prostitution, which engenders human trafficking. So the regulations are an important tool for us in this battle.

We even attack human trafficking from inside the Harris County Jail. I have worked hard to empower inmates to share information about crimes they are aware of in the free-world. Sometimes this information leads to the identification or arrest of pimps and smugglers. I have also started an inmate rehabilitation program, called "Been There Done That", in which a team, led by certified recovery coach who knows firsthand the struggles of prostitutes and drug addicts. She provides valuable counseling to inmates serving time for prostitution or related crimes. In group sessions, some of the inmates speak out about having been trafficked and/or sold for the production of child pornography.

This compelling rehab program has received national publicity, and deservedly so. The recidivism rate for graduates of the program is very low.

At the same time, Harris County's juvenile justice system has become more sophisticated in responding to juvenile victims of human trafficking. I have shared a significant amount of Asset Forfeiture dollars with the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department to help their efforts with juveniles they identify as victims of human trafficking within their system.

You would be right to assume that sex slavery is not the only form of human trafficking in Houston. Several times a year in the unincorporated area of Harris County, where 1.7 million people now live, my deputies encounter "stash houses" where people smuggled across the border are held captive by the smugglers, forced to work in hard labor with scant food and bad living conditions, supposedly to pay off smuggling fees.

And so I ask you to carry my message to your colleagues in Congress on at least these two concrete actions that can be taken:

- First, bi-partisan legislation on the framework of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act proposed by Sen. Cornyn and Congressman Poe would provide funding for domestic trafficking deterrence and victims' support programs at the federal level. Among other things, it would also create a new grant program helping states and local governments to develop and implement comprehensive programs to rescue victims and prosecute human traffickers.

We welcome other categories of grant funding for technology and equipment. But the real need is funding for more "booths on the ground," meaning personnel so that we can have the necessary investigative team for the actual problem that we believe exists. I am confident in saying more officers dedicated to fighting human trafficking in Harris County would mean more arrests of traffickers. Obviously, I believe that major cities with international airports and a port in a border state should get special consideration.

- Secondly, I urge Congress to move on passing sensible immigration reform that would give us even more ammunition against sex slavery and human trafficking. Proposed legislation would include more resources to secure our borders. We need an immigration system that supports those who simply want earn an honest living to support their family back home, an effective Guest Worker Program that meets the demand of our economy could be a key element in putting smugglers out of business.

It was the Brazero Program of the 40's that provided the pathway for me to be here before you as a proud American and as your Sheriff. My father helped to build the rail lines and

worked in the fields of California because he wanted to get married and start a family back home. Because he played by the rules but more importantly, because the entry process was something he could depend on was why he was able to drive across the International Bridge in Brownsville, and not have to swim across the Rio Grande.

So grateful was he of the “permission” to be allowed to enter the United States that the first thing he could think to do as he crossed the bridge was to stop and get everyone out of the station wagon. When my older brother asked what was wrong, he instructed everyone to kneel on the side of the road as he led them in prayer, saying in Spanish “Thank you God for the opportunity to come to this great country! We will be good citizens, we will obey the laws, and we will work hard to give back everything that this country will give us! Amen.”

Mr. Chairman, please tell your colleagues that if not for an immigration system that worked back then, my father may have turned to a human trafficker and our fate, my fate could have been a very different one. Thank you.

#