



Senate Bill 941 (Paxton)/House Bill 451 (Thompson)

Relating to ensuring children vulnerable to human trafficking are identified

Proposed Legislation: Texas can do more to protect its children from human trafficking. **Until Texas chooses to identify the children most vulnerable to human trafficking, it cannot and will not stop trafficking.** To address the identified gaps and enhance our response to human trafficking, Texas must pass legislation to require that all youth involved with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems be screened for signs of human trafficking. Department of Family and Protective Services and Texas Juvenile Justice Department already have access to tools to screen for human trafficking. Universal screening will ensure that every youth in the state's care who is a past or potential future victim of human trafficking is identified and can receive targeted services.

Scope of the Problem

Human trafficking remains a persistent issue in Texas, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable segments of our population, including children in the state's foster care and juvenile justice systems. Children who are under the care of these systems are particularly susceptible, highlighting a critical need for a more robust and coordinated response to prevent human trafficking and a responsibility for the State of Texas.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, up to half of child sex trafficking victims have spent time in the foster care system.¹ The traumas and challenges that lead children into these systems, such as abuse, neglect, and instability also increase their vulnerability to human trafficking. These children often lack stable support networks and may be more easily manipulated by traffickers who exploit their need for basic life necessities, money, care, and protection. These factors underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and comprehensive support.

Current Efforts Deserve Support and Expansion

DFPS and TJJD have recognized this issue and have selected the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) as a validated, universally applicable screening tool for those 10 and up. Despite these efforts, the data reveals a troubling gap in the implementation of this screening tool.

¹ https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/report_congress_child_trafficking.pdf

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Currently, TJJD is working on implementing universal screening for all children in their care. DFPS's policy is that youth aged 12 years or older in DFPS conservatorship, who have experienced five or more placements with no known sex trafficking victimization and no missing events in the last 12 months, should be screened if they have not had a CSE-IT completed in the past year. Youth at High Risk, defined as those 10 years or older in DFPS conservatorship recovered from a missing or runaway episode, should be screened at recovery. In addition, DFPS's policy is that they screen children aged 10 and older who are part of a Sex Trafficking (SXTR) investigation.²

According to data provided by Allies Against Slavery's Lighthouse platform, **DFPS identified 371 suspected or confirmed victims of sex trafficking in 2022 through their investigations³, yet only 332 children total were screened that year.⁴ This is only .8% of the children in foster care for that year (38,294) and less than the total number of children that were found to be likely victims of trafficking by DFPS's own investigations.⁵**

For those systems involved children that score a clear concern, the Governor's Sex Trafficking Team has put together Commercial Sexual Exploited Youth (CSEY) Advocacy Care Coordination teams that cover 95% of the state. These children could receive the supports they need to heal, but they first need to be identified.

² https://www.dfps.texas.gov/handbooks/CPS/Resource_Guides/Human_Trafficking_Response_Protocol.pdf

³ https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Reports_and_Presentations/Agencywide/documents/2023/2023-05-31_Children_Youth_Missing_DFPS_Conservatorship_Human_Trafficking_Data_FY2022_Report.pdf (page 19)

⁴ <https://lighthouse-data.alliesagainstslavery.org/dashboard>

⁵ https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Reports_and_Presentations/Agencywide/documents/2023/2023-05-31_Children_Youth_Missing_DFPS_Conservatorship_Human_Trafficking_Data_FY2022_Report.pdf (page 22)

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