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Chairman McCaul and Members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and discuss this extremely important issue which challenges us all on every level – global, national, state and local.

For several years now, statistics on Human Trafficking have consistently shown the State of Texas to rank at or near the top of reported incidents to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC). Additionally, the City of Houston is most commonly referred to as a “hub” for Human Trafficking with reports to the NHTRC Hotline in Houston far exceeding those of any other city in Texas.

There are many factors here in Houston that come together to make this city a “perfect storm” for Human Trafficking, including but not limited to:

- Major international airport
- Major international shipping port
- Largest city in Texas and closest to the Mexican border
- I-10 corridor which stretches from the east to the west coasts
- US-59 corridor which runs from Mexico to Canada
- Popular location for minors to runaway
- Large sex industry with limited regulations
- Constantly expanding population creating a constant need for labor

In order to help combat this scourge on our community, I recently authorized the formation of the Houston Police Department’s Human Trafficking Unit (HTU) within the Vice Division. The formation of the HTU was intended to consolidate the department’s resources into a single unit for better tracking, quicker response and more thorough, focused investigations involving Human Trafficking. In addition to the HTU personnel working within the Vice Division, this new unit also consists of:

- 2 officers assigned to the Houston Innocence Lost Task Force (HILTF) which investigates Domestic Human Trafficking cases, and
- 2 officers assigned to the Harris County Human Trafficking Task Force (HTTF) which investigates International Human Trafficking cases.

Additionally, the HTU is currently in discussions with U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (ICE) Human Trafficking Unit to share resources and data. HPD's efforts to combat Human Trafficking are NOT just limited to the formation of the new HTU. The entire Vice Division, which is made up of over 65 classified and civilian personnel has been reorganized to focus on investigating and combatting Human Trafficking. On a broader scale, all HPD classified officers throughout the department have, or are currently being trained to identify and investigate Human Trafficking, both in the sex industry and the labor industry. Finally, the HPD is working diligently to establish and nurture relationships not only with area law enforcement agencies but with rescue and support organizations such as Polaris, the YMCA, Catholic Charities and the Houston Rescue and Restore Coalition.

For years, the City of Houston has fought countless legal battles with various sexually oriented businesses in an effort to regulate this industry. Late last year, Mayor Annise Parker, with the aid of the City's Legal Department took a bold step and entered into a settlement agreement of multiple long-standing lawsuits with several area strip clubs. As part of that settlement agreement, these strip clubs can no longer operate "private" rooms which are well known to be the locations where various criminal acts including prostitution and narcotics take place, and where under-aged girls are hidden away and victimized. This agreement is still in its infancy and considered controversial by some, but the efforts to force members of the sex industry to take responsibility for helping to eradicate Human Trafficking on their own properties has, so far, shown many positive results.

The Houston Police Department's dedication to combatting Human Trafficking can best be illustrated in two very recent cases. The first case involved a request for assistance by a local police agency about 100 miles south of Houston to aid in the investigation of a possible Human Trafficking ring operating a couple of massage parlors in two separate municipalities. The investigation resulted in the dismantling of an organized group that was trafficking female Chinese nationals for prostitution. The operations were being conducted in these two cities while the money was funneled through multiple banks accounts in Houston. This case serves as a great example of the need for law enforcement to work on a "regional" level to combat Human Trafficking in their jurisdictions.

The second recent case involved an 18 year old female victim of Human Trafficking who contacted the NHTRC hotline asking for help to escape her violent pimp. The young victim had been forced to have sex with a "john" who ended up stabbing her and leaving without paying her any money. While her injuries were not life threatening, she did require medical attention for her injuries, however, the pimp refused to take her to get medical treatment until she earned him more money to make up for the money that the previous "john" did not pay. Vice HTU personnel received the information from NHTRC personnel, and were able to contact, locate and rescue the young female, and also arrest the pimp and charge him with felony compelling prostitution. The young victim was reunited with family members that day by Vice HTU. This case serves as a great example of how law enforcement and non-governmental organizations can successfully work together to not only rescue the victims of Human Trafficking, but to also arrest the perpetrators of this crime and to get them off the street and away from the other victims we know are still out there.

I would like to close my testimony by responding to a question that was posed to me by Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee – What can the Feds do to help? I have three responses to this very important question.

First, one of the biggest limitations on the ability of area law enforcement agencies to successfully combat Human Trafficking in and around Houston is our lack of “data sharing.” The persons and/or groups that are committing these crimes are not limited by our jurisdictional boundaries. We (local law enforcement) need the feds to build a Human Trafficking Regional Database in LEO (Law Enforcement On-Line), accessible only to Vice/HT Task Force personnel to store, share and search data on all aspects of Houston area Human Trafficking investigations. LEO is a web-based program that is accessible to federal, state and local law enforcement officers and can be “silo-ed” or restricted to only certain law enforcement personnel. This would allow Human Trafficking investigators from all over the Houston area to have immediate access to not only their department’s data, but the data from other area agencies to better coordinate their investigations with each other in a much more effective and efficient manner. The technology to accomplish this is already there, and I am asking for the feds to take the lead in this matter.

Second, most statistics indicate that the average age of a female when she is first victimized into Human Trafficking is 12 year old. For this fact alone, it is obvious why the majority of federal investigations/prosecutions of Human Trafficking involve “minors” (those under 18yoa). However, many of the females that my officers are encountering on the streets, in the massage parlors and strip clubs, and on the internet sites are typically age 18-21. We know from experience that while these young women may be adults now, they have in all likelihood been under the control of a pimp/trafficker for many years. We need to take definitive steps to ensure that this group of “victims” does not fall through the cracks because we are focusing on the minors by ensuring that the laws we pass and the support/assistance we establish is also available to these young women.

Finally, there is proposed legislation in Washington being sponsored by Houston area Congressmen including Senator John Cornyn and Congressman Ted Poe, “Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act.” This is very important legislation and is worthy of your consideration and support.

Again, I would like to thank Chairman McCaul and each of the Committee Members for coming to Houston to address this very important issue. I thank you for your time, for your efforts and most of all, for your leadership.