

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • July 2026 • Vol. 24 • No. 7

FOCUS: This issue of the newsletter examines how state laws vary around the issue of human trafficking.

Human trafficking is illegal under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). However, not every legal case reaches federal court, and state laws govern the majority of cases.

All states must align with the TVPA standards to effectively criminalize sex and labor trafficking, punish traffickers, and provide victim support. However, the penalties differ by state, and support to victims and survivors varies.

In 2003, Washington State became the first state to criminalize human trafficking, and since then, every state has enacted laws establishing criminal penalties for traffickers. Anti-trafficking statutes vary according to how human trafficking is conceptualized, the severity of and penalties for offenses, and the inclusion of laws aimed at holding other parties accountable for their involvement in trafficking. Some states have enacted measures that specifically address penalties that apply to a business entity, such as hotels, if it has committed or profited from sex or labor trafficking. States also vary in how they establish resources and support systems for victims of trafficking, such as survivor houses and social services.

Hindering efforts in states to strengthen legislation to prevent human trafficking and support survivors may be the perception that human trafficking is not a problem statewide. A [poll](#) released in 2025 by the University of California, Irvine, and the anti-trafficking nonprofit [EverFree](#) found that while nearly 99% of Americans view trafficking as a global and national issue, only about 80% believe it is a problem in their own state. The source of much of this newsletter is [The National Conference of State Legislatures](#).

Awareness in Schools

Several U.S. states have enacted legislation requiring human trafficking prevention education in schools to protect students and increase awareness. In 2017, California became the first state to require human trafficking prevention training for staff and education for students in grades 7-12, while Florida passed legislation two years later requiring education on the topic for K-12.

Legislation passed in 2023 that mandates education about human trafficking in [Washington State](#) schools was created by a student. Most state school programs target students in middle and high school.

Washington State Senate Bill 5355 was [created, drafted, and negotiated by Eastside Preparatory School senior Ria Bahadur](#). Bahadur was inspired to create the bill upon learning that Washington is the sixth largest epicenter of sex trafficking in the United States and that more than 45 percent of all victims are minors in schools.

SB 5355 mandates that students be taught:

- Information related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status as it relates to both victims and perpetrators.
- Medically and legally accurate definitions of sex trafficking and information related to how those terms become stigmatized.
- Information on reporting systems and basic identification training to determine if someone is at risk or has been trafficked.



Awareness

Public Awareness and Commercial Drivers

If you have traveled over the past few years, you may have noticed that many states have installed posters in weigh stations, ports of entry, Welcome Centers, and rest areas to educate travelers about human trafficking and to encourage them to report suspicious activity. Emphasizing the role of these posters can help policymakers and law enforcement see their importance in collective efforts to prevent trafficking, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

In July 2016, Ohio became the first state to implement mandatory training via [Truckers Against Trafficking](#) (TAT). Since then, many states are looking to professional drivers for help in combating trafficking.

TAT is a nonprofit organization that educates trucking and travel plaza industry members to empower them to recognize and appropriately respond to domestic sex trafficking. The group claims to have registered 300,000 trucking industry members on its website as TAT-trained.

Several U.S. states, including Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, and Colorado, require human trafficking awareness training for Commercial Driver's License (CDL) applicants or renewals to help drivers identify and report trafficking.

Texas was the first to adopt Truckers Against Trafficking training at the CDL school level.

Truckers Against Trafficking training covers identifying indicators of trafficking, such as dropping off victims at hidden locations, verbal abuse, or coaches controlling victims. It also emphasizes clear reporting procedures for truck and ride-share drivers to follow when they observe suspicious activity, ensuring prompt, effective responses.

In addition, the [Department of Transportation](#) has developed resources for transportation stakeholders to identify and address trafficking, such as training for flight attendants to recognize potential trafficking.

In 2025, Connecticut passed a law that requires all state employees to complete online training about sexual assault and trafficking developed by the [Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities](#) (CHRO) and all employers with three or more employees to post information about resources available to victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

Statewide Commemorations

Several states have enacted statewide commemorations to call attention to the issue of human trafficking in the states. For several states, such as Hawaii, North Carolina, California, and New Jersey, this occurs in January, designated as Human Trafficking Awareness Month. Oregon and New Jersey also designate January 11 as "Human Trafficking Awareness Day".



Penalties for Businesses

Some states have enacted measures that specifically address penalties that apply to a business entity (for example, hotels, farms, and massage parlors) if it has committed, or has been used in committing, a human trafficking crime. Laws in some states also set forth procedures for dissolving the business entity and imposing additional penalties.

State Examples:

- Over 10 years ago, Alabama passed a law that made the prosecution of corporations or legal entities for human trafficking, and if the crime was authorized, requested, commanded, or performed in a way that the entity knew or should have known was occurring.
- Massachusetts enables a business entity that commits trafficking of people or forced labor services to be fined up to \$1 million. The state also holds any business that knowingly aids, or is jointly involved in, labor trafficking civilly liable.
- South Carolina law requires an additional penalty of up to 10 years in prison if a business owner uses his or her business to facilitate sex or labor trafficking crimes.
- Rhode Island and the Virgin Islands both specify that a business entity may be prosecuted if it knowingly engages in human trafficking or if its employees engage in such conduct as part of a pattern that the entity knew about and failed to stop. Both states specify that a business entity may be prosecuted if it knowingly engages in human trafficking or if its employees engage in such conduct as part of a pattern that the entity knew about and failed to stop.
- Hawaii, Minnesota, and Vermont laws mandate the dissolution of a business upon conviction for human trafficking offenses.



The Oregon House passed **legislation** in 2025 targeting illicit massage businesses by expanding enforcement authority and increasing criminal penalties and fines.

In 2025, Virginia signed a bill (HB 2033) into law requiring the Department of Criminal Justice in Virginia to develop a course for the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority to offer retail establishments at no cost to help train their employees to recognize and report instances of suspected human trafficking.



Advocacy

Statewide Task Forces

If you live in a state with an active Human Trafficking Task force, you may be surprised to learn that as of the beginning of 2026, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, Montana, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Penn, S. Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming had not enacted legislation creating or granting the authority to create a statewide human trafficking task force, nor similar coordination effort.

Eight other states, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, and Rhode Island, have enacted legislation granting a task force only in reference to sex trafficking, not labor trafficking.

Montana has active human trafficking investigation efforts and legislative discussions, but a comprehensive, long-standing, legislatively mandated task force has been less established than in other states.

Thirteen States and D.C. also have task forces operated by separate agencies, such as the attorney general's office or the Department of Justice. These include [Alaska](#), [Arizona](#), [California](#), [Georgia](#), [Indiana](#), [Iowa](#), [Kansas](#), [Montana](#), [Nevada](#), [Ohio](#), [Vermont](#), [Virginia](#), and [Wisconsin](#). The operational structure of these agency-led task forces can differ significantly from legislatively mandated ones, affecting coordination and jurisdictional authority.

In January 2026, federal initiatives were introduced to further strengthen and standardize efforts to establish human trafficking task forces in every state.

There is no federal law that imposes criminal or civil penalties on individuals who generate and distribute AI-generated nonconsensual intimate imagery. Several states, including California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, South Dakota, Texas, and Virginia, have enacted laws, though most include civil penalties, not criminal.

Immunity from Prosecution

To prevent arrested victims from entering the justice system, state laws can provide for immunity from prosecution or diversion to rehabilitative services. Many states apply these protections only to trafficked youth, as they are considered the most vulnerable population. Laws also charge agencies with developing comprehensive plans for assisting trafficked youth once they are identified and diverted from the justice system. Diversion options may require admission of guilt or the entry of a conditional plea. As of early 2026, 38 states and the District of Columbia provide victims immunity and diversion.

States that do not allow protections for trafficked youth include Idaho, Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas, Iowa, Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, and Louisiana.

Kentucky, Montana, North Dakota, and Oklahoma require that a youth be a victim of trafficking crimes to receive immunity, illustrating targeted protections for identified victims.

North Dakota provides immunity for a range of offenses, including misdemeanor forgery, theft, credit offenses, and controlled substances crimes, in addition to prostitution, demonstrating broader protections for trafficked individuals involved in various criminal activities.

Kentucky provides immunity from prosecution for status offenses committed by trafficked youth.

Nebraska and Wyoming are the only states to provide immunity from prosecution for both trafficked children and adults.

Safe Harbor Laws

Safe Harbor Laws are an attempt to reduce the criminalization of children who were victims of prostitution, emphasizing their importance in child protection efforts. As of early 2026, over 30 U.S. states have enacted 'Safe Harbor' laws to treat victims of child sex trafficking as victims rather than criminals, and may provide immunity from prostitution charges, and connect them with social services. Safe Harbor Laws in states range from very comprehensive laws that include specialized child services to areas with limited or no services, underscoring the need for continued advocacy and policy development.

Virginia recently passed two bills that will support future Safe Harbor responses. House Bill 581 requires the establishment of multidisciplinary human trafficking response teams. Collaborative, [multidisciplinary groups](#) (“MDTs”) addressing human trafficking have become essential in the national fight against human trafficking and the provision of necessary services and resources to survivors.

This model, which brings together law enforcement, child welfare, service providers, advocates, other professionals, and the child and their family, is recognized worldwide as a best practice in the anti-trafficking field. Through MDTs, all involved can work collaboratively to prioritize the well-being of the survivor and provide trauma-informed support and services. The creation of these MDTs will support future implementation of a Safe Harbor response.

Hawaii passed legislation that will allow judges to consider children’s trauma histories when making sentencing decisions in cases involving child victim-defendants who harm their abusers, and also legislation that would provide legal protection to survivors of sexual exploitation who seek medical or law enforcement assistance for themselves or others.

Restitution

When traffickers are convicted of their crimes, the law in 48 states and the District of Columbia requires that they pay restitution to their victims. The goal of restitution in criminal cases is to financially address the harm done to a person. State restitution laws in trafficking cases may contribute to payment for medical and psychological services, housing, childcare, property costs, repatriation, and the cost of labor provided. As of early 2026, the only states that do not provide restitution are Montana and Nebraska.

In Tennessee, [a new law](#) effective at the beginning of this year requires tattoo artists to complete up to one hour of training on recognizing and reporting signs of trafficking.

Action

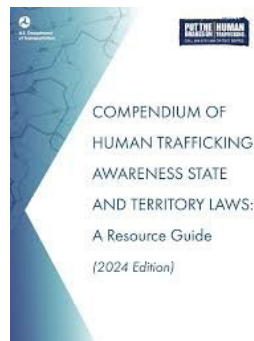


The National Conference of State Legislatures

compiles legislation

as passed by each state. Created by state legislators and legislative staff in 1975, NCSL serves America's 50 states, commonwealths, territories, and the District of Columbia. Every state legislator and staffer is a member of the organization and has full access to the latest bipartisan policy research, training resources, and technical assistance tailored to their needs. This was the source of much of this month's newsletter.

This second edition of the "Compendium of Transport-Specific Human Trafficking State and Territory Laws: A Resource Guide" was compiled



by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Leaders Against Human Trafficking initiative in May of 2024 as a resource for transportation stakeholders.

Legislative Process: How a Bill Becomes a Federal Law

Please click [here](#) to view this 20-minute video on how a bill becomes law, starting with an individual's idea to improve a situation.

FastDemocracy is a St. Louis-based technology company and mobile app that provides real-time legislative tracking for the federal government and all 50 state governments. Designed for advocacy professionals, nonprofits, and citizens, it uses AI to monitor bill movement, alert users to votes, analyze similarities in bill text, and manage government relations in a nonpartisan manner.

You may sign up for FastDemocracy and receive emails each Saturday on legislative updates on both the state and national levels on the issues of your choice.



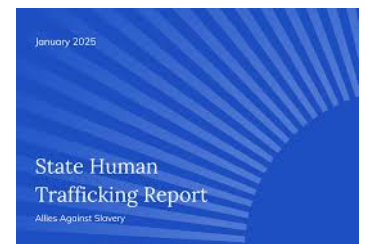
The State Human Trafficking Report

- 2025 offers a

comprehensive look at state-level policy responses and federal prosecution trends

related to human trafficking in the U.S. Covering 2003–2023, the report analyzes 20 specific anti-trafficking policies categorized under prevention, protection, and prosecution, as well as over 2,300 federal prosecutions from 2000–2022.

Since 2003, states have passed 695 anti-trafficking policies. However, states vary in the scope and implementation. While some, like Florida and Washington, have passed nearly all recommended policies, others, like Idaho, have implemented fewer than six. The most widely adopted are prosecution policies, such as penalties for buyers, whereas policies to prevent the crime of human trafficking remain negligible.





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