

Legislature 2006: Parts of bill target 'human trafficking'

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Body

Modern-day slavery occurs in Georgia, and groups that help victims say a proposed immigration **bill** in the state **Legislature** could make it easier to punish those who exploit immigrants and others.

Such legislation would enable local police and prosecutors to handle such cases, supplementing federal law enforcement, supporters say.

"Passing local statutes is an extremely important element in our fight against **human trafficking**," said Steve Wagner, director of the **Human Trafficking** Program of the U.S. Department of Health and **Human** Services.

The main aspects of Senate **Bill** 529, introduced this week by Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), would prohibit government contractors from hiring illegal immigrants and would deny public benefits to illegal immigrants, among other provisions.

However, the **bill** also provides tough penalties for those who would enslave workers --- whether they are immigrants or not. It cracks down on pimps who force workers into prostitution.

"Oftentimes the discussion on illegal immigration centers around the idea of benefits they shouldn't receive," Rogers said. "I wanted to highlight the fact that there are a lot of illegal aliens who are being abused because of their illegal status."

Tapestri, a nonprofit organization based in DeKalb County that advocates for victims of **human trafficking**, supports the **bill**.

The group says it takes a long time to prosecute cases in federal court because there are a limited number of federal investigators.

A victim doesn't have to cross an international border or be an immigrant to be a "**trafficked**" person, although in many cases they are, experts say.

Trafficking could involve a case in which a nanny is forced to work in a home with no pay; an immigrant who comes to the United States expecting to work in a restaurant is forced to work as a prostitute; or a fruit picker works for months and never sees his wages.

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"The victim need not be shackled and locked up in order to qualify as a slave. The traffickers have become extremely adept at using fear to keep the person in slavery," Wagner said.

Rogers' **bill** closely resembles the federal **Trafficking** Victims Protection Act of 2000 and calls for penalties of up to 20 years for anyone who uses physical harm to force someone into working against his or her will, including as a prostitute. The penalty for forcing minors under 15 to perform commercial sexual activity, or threatening to do so for this purpose, is up to 25 years in jail.

Labor recruiters who delivered workers to an employer knowing they would be forced into servitude would face up to 15 years in jail.

Rogers at first wanted to **target** those who smuggle illegal immigrants into the country, commonly known as "coyotes," but the **bill** doesn't address that issue anymore.

Sen. Sam Zamarripa (D-Atlanta) argued against that provision, saying it was so vague that it could lead to making a criminal out of a homeowner who transports an illegal immigrant to his home to work on the yard.

Zamarripa said Friday he'll vote against the immigration **bill** the way it is now, even though he supports the new **trafficking** language.

"This stuff is moving way too fast," Zamarripa said. "No one has had time to vet it."

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