

Cut the human-trafficking demand by enforcing the laws

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Kudos to the Martin/Williams agency and Not for Sale Campaign for educating thousands of people at the World Cup about the painful reality of human trafficking. Gail Rosenblum's Star Tribune column ("These red cards at World Cup signal dark truth," June 17) identifies awareness as being the "first line of attack" to end what organizers call modern-day slavery. The column also emphasizes that an entrepreneurial approach is key, providing educational opportunities and job skills training to vulnerable children and adults.

An equally important part of the equation is a criminal-justice response that punishes those who buy and sell human beings for sex.

Minnesota has long been a leader in the struggle to end sexual exploitation, particularly sex trafficking of women and children. As early as 1978, advocates in Minnesota founded PRIDE, one of the first organizations in the country to serve commercially sexually exploited women. In 2009, several local nonprofits joined forces to strengthen the criminal penalties for those who traffic individuals for sex or profit from sex trafficking. These changes to our laws passed unanimously in the Legislature, demonstrating strong community support for ending sex trafficking in Minnesota. That's the good news. The bad news is that our state frequently fails to use its laws to hold sex traffickers and buyers of sex (who fuel this devastating multibillion-dollar industry) accountable.

Less than two weeks after Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed the "Bill for an Act to Combat Trafficking in Minnesota" into law in May 2009, the Star Tribune reported that a sex ring was busted. The article told of a prostitution ring operated by a former assistant Hennepin County attorney who was "expected to be federally charged for transporting women across state lines for sex." The article further stated that some of the "Nice Guys" had been detained and questioned, and they were "going to go after all of them." One year later, there have been no federal charges and no felony or misdemeanor charges. Is no one willing to hold these traffickers or johns responsible for their actions -- or explain to the public why they have not been charged?

Awareness is important. But it is equally important that we address the demand side of trafficking. Government agencies need to enforce antitrafficking laws and level meaningful sanctions against violators.

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