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New partnership announced to combat human trafficking in Fort Bend

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Fort Bend County District Attorney Brian Middleton, at podium and flanked by the leaders of Fort Bend County law enforcement agencies and others, announces a new partnership to combat human trafficking in the county.

Photo by Ken Fountain



Building on a collaborative announced earlier this year, the Fort Bend District Attorney's Office and local law enforcement on Monday announced a new partnership with a nationally known organization that combats human trafficking designed to "eradicate" the crime in Fort Bend County.

In January, District Attorney Brian Middleton, flanked by members of law enforcement and others, announced the formation the Fort Bend Anti-Trafficking Collective, headed by a three-year grant of \$888,888 (with matching local funding of about \$400,000) from the prosecutor's office) from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime. The grant expires in September 2027 but can be renewed, authorities said.

The task force is headed by Rhonda Kuykendall, a member of the prosecutor's office who previously led its Human Trafficking Community Awareness Team. It was already in partnership with the regional nonprofit United Against Human Trafficking, which focuses on providing services to survivors of human trafficking in its many forms.

On Monday, the task force announced a new partnership, with the Virginia-based Human Trafficking Institute, which according to its website "exists to decimate trafficking by stopping traffickers." The announcement was made in conjunction with a half-day seminar presented by HTI to the leadership of law enforcement agencies across Fort Bend County at the Gus George Law Enforcement Academy near the Fort Bend County Center in Richmond.

"We're serious about combating human trafficking. The United States abolished slavery in 1865. Yet, it still continues to persist which is irreconcilable with our religious beliefs, our laws, and the tenets on which this nation was founded," Middleton said.

"We intend to eradicate and combat human trafficking in Fort Bend County, Texas, and that's what you see here," Middleton said as the heads of most of the county's law enforcement agencies standing beside him. "Fort Bend County is moving against human trafficking and we want traffickers to know: get out of Fort Bend County. We will not tolerate it. We will hunt you down. We will prosecute you and send you to prison."

Middleton and Kuykendall said that the extent of the problem of trafficking in Fort Bend County is hard to quantify, because metrics are based largely on self-reporting by victims and the problem takes different forms than in parts of neighboring Harris County. Instead of "open-air prostitution," Middleton said, human trafficking is done largely through digital platforms such as social media, texting, and digital ads.

"Human trafficking looks different in different places," Kuykendall said. "It might show up in illicit massage businesses, hotels or online ads. In rural areas, it could be hidden in agricultural fields, construction sites, or traveling work crews. That's why one of our first priorities has been a county-wide community assessment to identify where those risks are the highest, and how traffickers exploit the vulnerabilities of both city and countryside."

Traci Bennett, the prosecutor's office's special crimes chief, said the partnership with HTI will help law enforcement and prosecutors build better cases against defendants charged with trafficking.

"It is going to allow us to really press in to modern forms of investigation, in data collection, as well as work with our victims and survivors in order to make the best cases that we can possibly make so that we can put more traffickers in prison and make the streets of Fort Bend County a safer place for everyone," she said.

"We are going to provide resources to all of these agencies. We're going to provide analysts, prosecutor back-up, investigators, in order to make their cases the best that we possibly can," she said. "We're going to be able to do training on trends in trafficking, on those things that haven't made it to Fort Bend yet, but we will be ready for them when they get here. And we will also prepare them to make better cases. This grant is a game-changer, it is a force-multiplier."

"What we are building is not just another initiative. It's a united front," Kuykendall said. "Law enforcement, prosecutors, service providers, and community leaders are joining forces to ensure that every survivor has a path to justice, safety, and healing."

"This is just not about identifying problems. This is building solutions. And the most powerful solutions come when they center from survivors' voices. Many of us standing here today, we know how exploitation thrives when people are not seen, when the voices are not heard, and when the trauma is misunderstood. But by listening to survivors, we build systems that are not only effective but also humane.

"This work takes courage. It takes consistency. And it takes every single one of us. If you are a community member, we need you to be vigilant. Because trafficking so many times is hidden in plain sight. And your awareness can save a life," she said.

"We are sending a message to survivors. You are not invisible, you are not alone, and there is a path forward," she said.

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