Human Trafficking News Digest: February 28, 2014
Compiled by the Center for Public Policy Studies

National Public Radio

Courts Take a Kinder Look at Victims of Child Sex Trafficking (March 1): Amy Farrell is an expert who studies sex trafficking laws. She tells NPR's Arun Rath some states are trying to fix the problem through what are called safe harbor laws. Twelve states have passed safe harbor legislation for child victims of sex trafficking, according to Farrell. She says the basic premise of these laws is to give law enforcement and prosecutors a way to divert children who have been prostituted from a juvenile delinquent proceeding and instead put them into what's called a “child in need” proceeding. In some states without safe harbor laws, there are efforts to set up special courts specifically to deal with these cases. In California, there is no safe-haven law; minors can, and are, prosecuted for prostitution. But in Los Angeles County, Judge Catherine Pratt has set up a special juvenile court to help victims of sex trafficking. During the last few years, Pratt has been consumed by her work helping young victims of sex trafficking get treated as just that: victims. She says it's been a tough battle because the justice system treats anyone who sells sex as a criminal — even a child. In normal juvenile courts, young women who are picked up for prostitution don't get counseling and other services — they get punished. Girls can be sentenced to juvenile detention or forced to testify against their exploiter. To help these victims of sex trafficking make connections with trusted adults, Pratt's court partners with advocacy groups, where adult survivors of sex trafficking work as mentors. Judge Pratt says that initially her treatment-focused approach was working as intended. It improved the ability to prosecute the traffickers. But then something else happened. A lot of the boys who were coming out of foster care and the juvenile justice system were becoming pimps. Nationwide, pimps are prosecuted far less often than the children they exploit. The men who buy sex from minors are very rarely prosecuted. Farrell says states are beginning to change the law, stiffening the penalties for purchasing sex from a child.

The Omaha World-Herald

Iowa Senate Oks Bill to Address Human Trafficking Involving Minors (February 28): The Iowa Senate unanimously approved a measure that would crack down on human trafficking involving minors. In a 48-0 vote Thursday, the Senate approved the bill. It returns to the House, which passed similar legislation earlier this week. The bill would toughen penalties for those who sexually exploit minors and requires the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy to include data about training, staffing and investigative efforts dealing with human trafficking in an annual report. It also establishes a fund for programs that provide services and support to human trafficking victims. Democratic Sen. Robert Dvorsky, who sponsored the bill, said that human trafficking is becoming a more serious problem across the country and that his bill is an effort to strengthen laws in Iowa.

The Arizona Republic

Child-Sex-Sting Defendants May Face Short Sentences (February 27): The potential penalties for each of the 30 suspects arrested last year in a Tempe teen-prostitution sting initially ranged from at least seven to 21 years in
prison for first-time offenders, but if a recent hearing for one of the suspects is any indication, convicted defendants will be spending just months or weeks, instead of years, behind bars. The cases are just beginning to enter the bargaining stage, and offer a glimpse into how the focus on sex trafficking and calls for stricter penalties for those convicted of soliciting minors for sex conflict with the court system’s preference for efficient justice. Maricopa County Attorney Bill Montgomery served on Gov. Jan Brewer’s human-trafficking task force that recommended harsher penalties for defendants convicted of soliciting sex with minors. And anti-trafficking advocates have had a visible presence in the Valley in anticipation of Super Bowl XLIX because the event is said to attract sex traffickers and potential clients. But the most publicized defendant in last year’s prostitution sting could serve as few as 15 days in jail or as many as 90 days if he accepts a plea deal. He also would not be required to register as a sex offender. Anti-child-prostitution advocates say plea offers like Marfé’s are the reason business is booming. Christine Raino, policy counsel for Shared Hope International, said there’s such a dramatic gap in the potential penalties for child-prostitution crimes. Legislation that would broaden the law’s language to ensure that johns will face more severe penalties if they “should have known” that a girl was 15, 16 or 17, is making its way through the Legislature this year and has support from key lawmakers.

**Capital Journal**

**Shift in Policing in SD Turns Up Heat on Sex Trade** (February 26): Three years ago, prostitution was an afterthought for Sioux Falls police. There were six arrests in 2010: Four for prostitution, two for pimping. Last year, Sioux Falls police made 99 arrests. Police credit public awareness, cooperation from local hotels and motels and community education about sex trafficking as a factor in the success of the new-found focus on sex-for-money crimes. Advocates for sex-trafficking victims say the attitude of street crimes detectives toward those involved in the sex trade has shifted, with prostitutes looked upon as victims instead of criminals. For more than a decade, federal law has defined those pushed into sex for money through force, fraud or coercion as victims, but acceptance of that definition within law enforcement has come slowly. Kimberly St. John, shelter director for Mita Maske Ti Ki, or My Sister Friend’s House, said she and others who work with sex-trafficking victims now are seeing that shift in thinking from police. Officers still make plenty of arrests for prostitution, said Lt. David McIntire, who heads the street crimes unit of the Sioux Falls Police Department. There were more arrests for prostitution than for pimping in 2013. The goal of the arrests is different now, McIntire said. Victims often aren’t ready to leave the life the moment they meet an officer, thinking that their pimps or “boyfriends” are there to take care of them, in spite of any physical and emotional abuse they might have inflicted. The jump in prostitution-related arrests began in earnest in 2011, when police arrested 11 women in a sting operation. The following year, officers began to focus their operations on johns and traffickers. The biggest formal change came last year, as U.S. Attorney Brendan Johnson convened a human-trafficking task force, which included law enforcement from the state Division of Criminal Investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Sioux Falls police and the Minnehaha County Sheriff’s Office. Focusing resources on sex trafficking has helped increase the number of arrests, but McIntire said there still is work to be done in the community. There aren’t enough safe and affordable homes for the women who want out of the life.
CBC Sacramento

Human Trafficking Brings Easy Money, Hard Lives for Teenage Girls (February 25): Federal investigators say Sacramento is a gateway for human trafficking, and they say victims and their peddlers at are the proof. An undercover officer with the Sacramento County’s anti-human trafficking unit says, “The population is extremely vulnerable and (that) they’re running away from something. So many of them are involved in the foster care system. They have bad situations at home.” Many are homeless youth, some as young as 14 having what’s called “survival sex” for food and shelter. “They have nothing else to give other than to sell their bodies unfortunately,” the officer said. Law enforcement says Sacramento is Northern California’s gateway for human trafficking in part because of its location. The Interstate 80 corridor makes moving people easy.

The Oregonian

Washington Lawmakers Attempt to Take a Stronger Stance Against Human Sex Trafficking (February 24): Washington state lawmakers are attempting to take a stand against human sex trafficking. One bill heard in committee Monday offers victims of sex trafficking additional legal protection, another expands the penalties for those guilty of sex trafficking. House Bill 1292 would allow someone convicted of prostitution who was also a victim of trafficking to vacate the record of his or her conviction regardless of a previous, current or subsequent criminal history. Currently, victims of trafficking are allowed to apply for the vacation of a prostitution conviction as long as they haven’t been convicted of prostitution before, don’t have any other criminal charges pending and haven’t been convicted of any new crimes. Prostitution is a misdemeanor in Washington. Former King County Sheriff and SeaTac Chief of Police Jim Graddon testified in support of the bill, saying it assisted greater goals of law enforcement. House Bill 1791 would reclassify anyone guilty of sex trafficking as a sex offender. Sex offenders are required to provide their personal information to local sheriffs. That information becomes available to the public.

KDLT News

Human Trafficking Summit Held in San Francisco (February 24): The South Dakota House Judiciary Committee recently gave their full support to a bill that would allow human trafficking victims to seek financial compensation from their abusers. That’s just one small victory for the fight against an industry that uses money and sex to literally enslave people against their will, and the number of victims continues to grow. Representative Kristi Noem says kids are being targeted more, “In the last year or two, we’ve heard a lot of our children being approached and drawn into the industry at their high schools, at the junior high schools where they started drawing them in through social media – Facebook and Twitter – getting them attached to them and slowly over weeks, maybe a month or two, getting them attached.” The University Center in Sioux Falls hosted a meeting which brought together researchers, advocacy organizations, and law enforcement. Representative Noem, who planned and organized the event, “If we can get everyone who is involved together in one spot, bringing the
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awareness level up, but creating a plan of action in what we can do to stop this industryDemocratic Sen. Robert Dvorsky, who sponsored the bill, said that human trafficking is becoming a more serious problem across the country and that his bill is an effort to strengthen laws in Iowa."

Miami Herald

30 Arrested in All-Star Weekend Sex Trafficking (February 22: Louisiana state police say an investigation involving local authorities and the FBI resulted in 30 arrests in connection with sex trafficking during the NBA All-Star weekend in New Orleans. The arrests included 22 women and four men arrested on prostitution-related charges. Four other men were booked for allegedly using computers to solicit minors for sex. The operation also resulted in the rescue of a juvenile believed to have been exploited since she was 14. The women are believed to have traveled to New Orleans from across the country including California, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas to engage in sex-related crimes during the NBA All-Star weekend. The arrests were the latest related to law enforcement efforts to stop human trafficking during major sporting events that draw large numbers of tourists to major cities. Ahead of the 2014 Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium, New Jersey officials set up training for legions of law enforcement personnel, hospitality workers, high school students, airport employees and others on identifying the signs of sex trafficking. Later, authorities reported that 16 juveniles forced into prostitution were rescued by the FBI in a two-week operation leading up to the Super Bowl.

Houston Chronicle

South Dakota Panel Oks 1 Human Trafficking Bill (February 21): One of three bills regarding human trafficking passed the South Dakota House Judiciary Committee on Friday, a measure that would help victims sue their perpetrators. The two rejected measures doubled efforts already in place, lawmakers said, one requiring the state to make a plan to assist victims and educate the public and the other allowing the state courts to clear convictions committed as a result of trafficking, such as prostitution. “Each one is as crucially important as the next,” said Rep. Jenna Haggar, the sponsor of all three bills, “and they tackle different perspectives on the bigger statewide issue of human trafficking.” But the Sioux Falls Republican was successful only with the one that helps victims form a civil case and file for damages against their trafficker. Haggar said she was disappointed with the results. The panel voted 8-4 to kill a bill that would have helped victims to clear their records of crimes committed while they were trafficked. Joezy Guest, a victim of human trafficking, testified Friday about this topic. Opponents said there are other policies in place to pardon these victims already. Paul Bachand of the State’s Attorneys Association said prosecutors have no interest in charging victims with crimes. The state Department of Social Services stood as the only opponent to Haggar’s victim services and education bill, in which the department would have had to collect and report human trafficking data in the state, as well as train law enforcement and create a public awareness campaign.

For more information visit www.htcourts.org
Portland Press Herald

Human Trafficking Bill Receives Support in Maine Legislature (February 20): A bill that would let victims of human trafficking have prostitution convictions vacated received overwhelming support during a public hearing Thursday, months after it was almost rejected. L.D. 1730, sponsored by Rep. Amy Volk, R-Scarborough, would give courts permission to vacate prostitution convictions against people who were forced or coerced into the crime. The amended bill that Volk presented Thursday also would set up a compensation fund for victims, paid for with increased fines for those who are convicted of promoting prostitution. It also would make the crime of furnishing drugs to a prostitute an aggravated offense. Volk said she was compelled to propose the legislation after learning about the increased prevalence of human trafficking in Maine, and the relative lack of protection for victims of trafficking, most of whom are women. Advocacy groups including the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the Maine Women’s Lobby and the National Association of Social Workers testified in support of the bill. Destie Hohman Sprague, representing the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said a national hotline regarding human trafficking had received 180 calls that originated in Maine. Steve Webster, a detective sergeant with the South Portland Police Department, said the bill is a good first step toward addressing a problem that exists mostly in the shadows and is underreported.

CNN

Southeast Sex-Trafficking Case Exposes Horrors of the Trade (February 19): In a telephone interview late Wednesday, a 25-year-old woman from Mexico City talked about trips to sprawling farms in Georgia and the Carolinas. There, 20, as many as 30, migrant workers stood in line outside shacks, waiting to have sex with women before the women were shuttled to other farms only to relive the horror. A Mexican national who operated out of Savannah was sentenced to life in federal prison Wednesday for his role in a sex-trafficking ring that prosecutors said traded women like slaves throughout the southeastern United States. Joaquin Mendez-Hernandez, 35, was described by prosecutors as a leader among 25 defendants indicted last year in Operation Dark Night, the largest sex-trafficking organization ever prosecuted in the Southern District of Georgia. His lawyer, Jonathan Hunt, could not be reached for comment. Mendez-Hernandez and his partners brought the young women into the U.S. from Mexico and other countries and forced them to have sex with up to 50 men each day for $25 a piece, prosecutors said. Brock Nicholson, special agent in charge of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s homeland security investigations in Georgia and the Carolinas, said Operation Dark Night rescued a dozen women but he acknowledged that hundreds continue to be ensnared in the trade nationally.