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Coalition pushes lawmakers to fight sex trafficking

By Christopher Quinn, AJC February 1, 2012
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A politically savvy coalition of religious groups and nonprofits is pushing Georgia's Legislature to take more steps against sex trafficking.



About 600 members rallied support at the state Capitol on Wednesday for the creation of a commission that will draft a plan to help victims of sex trafficking and crack down on those who run the trade.

U.S. Attorney Sally Quillian Yates of the Northern District of Georgia said last year that sex trafficking is one of Atlanta's most significant criminal problems.

The coalition formed about two years ago to help victims and lobby for better laws. Last year, Majority Whip Edward Lindsey, R-Atlanta, and others passed a law that made it easier to prosecute pimps and provide help for trafficked individuals.

Yet the coalition's work is far from over. A commission would create more avenues of assistance and look at refining laws to better help victims of sex trafficking.

Lisa Williams, who works with girls rescued in metro Atlanta from sex trafficking rings, spoke to a legislative subcommittee Wednesday, telling them she asked the girls what they wanted her to tell them.

"The girls said, 'Let them know that we never dreamed we would go through this,'" Williams said while encouraging the representatives to pass House Resolution 1151, which calls for creating the commission.

The subcommittee voted to move HR 1151 to the Judiciary Committee and recommended that it pass.

Rep. Buzz Brockway, R-Lawrenceville, a freshman and the resolution's primary sponsor, said he became aware of the problem while watching a documentary.

"I said, if I get elected, I am going to do something about this," Brockway said.

Lindsey said the faith-based organizations and nonprofits promoting changes have moved out of pews and boardrooms and gotten involved in letting people know the scale of the problem.

"They understand how to work the system," Lindsey said. "They approached me at the end of the 2010 session and were smart enough to bring members of my own church with them."

By the time last year's law came up for a vote, the groups had created unstoppable momentum, he said. Shared Hope International, a nonprofit that works on the issue, gives Georgia a middling score -- a C -- on having good laws to deal with sex trafficking, but that is up considerably from where it was. Georgia is among 10 states that got a B or C; nobody got an A, and more than half of the states failed.

"I think Georgia has begun to lead the way," said Alan Seelinger, who volunteers as a state leader for Washington-based International Justice Mission. That nonprofit works on sex trafficking and other issues.

"We are very encouraged to see the awareness of this issue grow over the last two years," he said.

Lindsey said he will introduce a bill this year to erase sex crime records for teenage victims of sex trafficking, if they stay out of trouble.

"To give them a second chance," he said.