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Reimagining Los Angeles County's Approach to Human Trafficking

Perpetrators of human trafficking compel their victims to provide labor and/or commercial sex through force, fraud, or coercion. In the United States, labor trafficking is a sophisticated enterprise that relies on a complex network of travel agencies, immigration consultants, employment agencies, and underground rooming houses that collectively function as a massive supply chain of workers for both legal and illicit industries across the nation. Labor trafficking is especially difficult to detect because the industries that exploit their workers generally appear to operate legitimately as bona fide concerns.

Over the past 20 years, human trafficking, comprising both labor and sex trafficking, has increased in Los Angeles County (County) and worldwide. The hidden nature of labor trafficking has made it clear to stakeholders and subject-matter experts that they cannot consider labor trafficking in isolation from wage theft or worker exploitation, nor can a workable solution be found absent input from the community of survivors of human trafficking. In effect, there is a pernicious labor exploitation

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continuum that has wage theft at one end and labor trafficking at the other end.

Fighting this exploitation requires a coalition of partners and must include guidance from those who have been caught in the cycle of trafficking and survived, as well as those who are part of the governmental agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) that have the resources to provide needed support and services.

In the context of underlying and pervasive conditions of poverty, vulnerability, and need, the cycle usually starts with debt bondage to entities here in the United States or in the exploited individual's home country, or both. The debt becomes a coercive force that creates a desperate need to stay employed to repay the debt and provide income for their dependents and their traffickers to maintain the safety of themselves and their families.

The County, with the help of numerous CBOs, engages in various concerted efforts to stem the tide of labor trafficking, including in the massage, garment, cannabis, and food production industries, among others. Yet the problem continues to grow, as does the human suffering it causes. At all jurisdictional levels, traditionally, the primary governmental approach to abating human trafficking has focused on sex trafficking, with law enforcement featured as the sole solution. While in recent years there has been a move towards a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach in enforcement against sex trafficking, this has not alleviated sex trafficking and labor trafficking enforcement remains marginal, with the net result that human trafficking continues to increase.

Indisputably, law enforcement will always have a critical and indispensable role to play in the struggle against human trafficking. When dangerous traffickers can be apprehended and prosecuted, law enforcement must be front and center. Even so,

subject matter experts, scholars and other stakeholders, including survivors, have elevated the need for a harm reducing, holistic approach that systematically aims to get at the problem earlier in the cycle of trafficking, and which centers on public health modalities: elevating community needs, experiences, and voices; grounding work in evidence, with consistent, comprehensive data gathering and sharing; advancing prevention by mitigating risk factors and enhancing protective factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels; and employing culturally and linguistically appropriate education and intervention strategies that foster trust, safety, equity, and autonomy. Uplifting the voices of those with experience of being trafficked can provide a practical focus for both governmental and non-government service providers to ensure the appropriate allocation and use of resources.

The time is ripe to support a paradigm shift from a sole focus on solving the problem with law enforcement to a parallel public health approach that centers on services for survivors and on community engagement, while remaining connected to the importance of law enforcement's role in prosecuting traffickers. Prudentially, such a shift requires an assessment of the work we've done and continue to do, as well as a vision for how to proceed.

The County's ongoing efforts to date include the human trafficking posting ordinance, the work of the Los Angeles Regional Human Trafficking Task Force, including the task force's subcommittees on labor trafficking and victim services, and multi-agency regulatory and prosecutorial working groups focused on the massage industry, wage theft, and the cannabis industry. Our efforts also include diverse partnerships with various CBOs and groups, including the Asian Pacific Islander Human

Trafficking Task Force, the Thai Community Development Center, Saving Innocence, the Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking, and many more.

Looking forward, stakeholders agree that a Countywide human trafficking coordinating body would be transformative because, with respect to enforcement, it could facilitate a whole of government approach by leveraging existing authority, agencies, inspectors, and investigators, and facilitating inter-agency data-sharing, to allow a concentration on the concurrent criminal activity "adjacent" to trafficking, including tax fraud and evasion, unemployment insurance fraud, disability insurance fraud, extortion, witness intimidation, health code violations, and other code violations.

Additionally, with respect to prevention, harm reduction, and providing paths out of the trafficking cycle, the coordinating body would work closely with service providers and community partners to ease access to the practical resources that victims require to become survivors and that vulnerable workers need to avoid being victimized: employment, housing, medical services, mental health services, legal aid with immigration and criminal matters, and more. The coordinating body would facilitate data sharing between law enforcement, public health, and all relevant regulatory and service agencies to enhance our ability to track progress and to be as responsive as possible to the realities at the street level.

Also looking forward, with two upcoming large-scale international sporting events in 2026 and 2028 the persistent belief that large sporting events cause significant increases in sex trafficking will again become a topic of discussion and concern. Indeed, in the lead up to the last Super Bowl in Los Angeles, law enforcement engaged in the planning and implementation of programs designed to combat the feared

increase.

Contrary to this belief, however, the evidence appears to show that sex trafficking does not increase around large sporting events.¹ In fact, the evidence instead seems to indicate that, if anything, labor trafficking is more likely to increase in such areas as construction because of the necessity of date-certain completion of stadiums and other related facilities, and in the service industry because of the demands for increased staffing in the face of the influx of event attendees.²

Moreover, human trafficking in the Los Angeles region is already a significant problem that continues notwithstanding any large-scale sporting events. Many anti-trafficking advocates have decried the focus on one-time events, rather than viewing trafficking as an ongoing issue that requires unmitigated focus and resources. The nature of the issue of human trafficking and these upcoming sporting events requires intentional scrutiny so that resources, if needed, can be allocated based on evidence.

The County is a critical pipeline for the supply of trafficked workers from all over the world because of its multiple ports of entry, cultural diversity, and substantial population of immigrants. Our ethnic enclaves, whether the Chinese community of Monterey Park, the Guatemalan community in La Puente, the Korean community in Koreatown, or many others, are ready made waystations for newly arrived migrant workers seeking a better life. We also know of other areas, such as the City of Pomona, that unfortunately, houses the notorious “Holt Corridor”, an area known for sex

¹ Miller, Kyle, Emily Kennedy, Artur Dubrawski. 2016. *“Do Public Events Affect Sex Trafficking Activity?”* arXiv:1602.05048, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1602.05048>

² Anderson, Kayla Lynn. 2015. “Cases of Forced Labor and Policy Responses Regarding Human Trafficking Legislation at Mega Sporting Events” University of Kansas. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/19531>

trafficking.

However, for the same reasons that each of these geographically specific enclaves provide havens for traffickers to create systems to move trafficking victims, they also provide significant opportunities to offer actual and incipient trafficking victims a path to a life of dignity and self-reliance. But viable alternatives need to be safe, comprehensive, and sustained.

Education and community empowerment forums are necessary and helpful in shedding light on what are viewed as taboo topics. For instance, in 2017, the first ever Sex Trafficking Forum was hosted by the First District, in conjunction with the Pomona Police Department and the City of Pomona, to bring light to an issue that is often hidden and unspoken due to the stigma and shame. As a result of this collaborative and educational forum, survivors, community members, and CBOs felt much more comfortable in being vocal about needs, resources, and services, as well as an increasing assistance to help survivors of sex trafficking.

Workers' rights and resource centers have proliferated in the past several years as places where workers can get help if they believe they have been exploited in any number of ways, or if they are otherwise in need of assistance. Establishing a workers' rights center in a given locale of migrant workers, for instance, in Monterey Park for Chinese migrant workers, could afford an opportunity to connect with vulnerable workers who are in transit, not yet subject to the direct control of any employers, and/or who may be open to receiving help to get on a path to safety and stability. Worker resource centers at key strategic locations have great potential to be an alternative to, and even to help dismantle, the infrastructure that enables the exploitation and

trafficking of vulnerable populations.

One such strategic location is known as "Fatty Ding's" Plaza, in the heart of Monterey Park. Newly arrived Chinese immigrants invariably go to Ding's Plaza to seek employment, immigration consultation, housing, and transportation to worksites around the country.³ Migrants rely on the cluster of employment agencies and travel agencies for work.⁴ In addition, their temporary housing needs are met through large numbers of unlicensed and often dangerous boarding homes in the areas that are referred to as "family hotels." The boarding homes offer short-term daily rates which are the only option for migrant workers due to their lack of credit and the transient nature of their work.⁵

Generally, migrant workers take on enormous debts from underground loan sharks in their home country on the promise that they will work off the debt in the United States. Their travel and work arrangements are coordinated by networks that include the home country loan sharks. Many aspects of the arrangements operate to put migrants in even more debt to various elements of the trafficking network: newly arrived migrants stay in the family hotels, rent mailboxes for their correspondence, are preyed on by fraudulent immigration services, and pay fees to "employment agencies" all of which feed on the insecurity, fear, and the lack of alternatives. Migrants may end up anywhere in the United States to work off their debts, but, as a human trafficking

³ *Cindy Chang, In an L.A. suburb, Chinese 'border crossers' seek a new life after harrowing journey, LA Times (July 27, 2023)* <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-07-27/monterey-park-chinese-border-crossers-look-new-life>

⁴ *Cindy Chang, Immigrants turn to job agencies for the American Dream, LA Times (March 7, 2014)*, <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-ff-c1-chinese-employment-agencies-20140307-dto-htmlstory.html>

⁵ *Yingjie Wang, Neither Human Nor Ghost: Chinese Immigrants Scrape By In San Gabriel Valley's Boarding Houses, LAist.com (March 11, 2020)*, <https://projects.laist.com/2020/sgv-boarding-houses/>

investigator in Seattle observed, “all roads lead to Monterey Park.”⁶ Law enforcement in New Mexico conducting human trafficking investigations agrees.⁷

A workers' resource center at “Fatty Ding’s” plaza offering crucial services could help stop the cycle of trafficking for this at-risk community by supporting survivors and preventing harm to vulnerable workers with the provision of culturally competent, linguistically accessible services including:

1. Employment services and referrals
2. Transportation services and assistance
3. Education, including ESL, Tenant's Rights, and Worker's Rights
4. Legal services and referrals for immigration, family law, and criminal issues, including expungements and services for crime victims.
6. Mental health services, case management, navigation, and counseling
7. Mailbox services and living supplies, including personal care items
8. Housing search and placement, including long-term and daily rate housing options
9. Public benefits enrollment
10. Health care services, including enrollment in full-scope Medi-Cal
11. Communications assistance including interpreter services, language access, and cell phone access

The County needs to continue its leadership and progress on ending human

⁶ Sara Jean Green, *Major prostitution bust: Seattle police raid 11 massage parlors, freeing 26 women*, *The Seattle Times* (March 7, 2019), <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/a-crazy-amount-of-money-seattle-police-raid-prostitution-network-in-massage-parlors/>

⁷ Ed Williams and Wufei Yu, *Fields of Green: COVID is pushing thousands of Chinese immigrant workers into the marijuana business-sometimes leading to exploitation and labor trafficking*, *Searchlight New Mexico* (December 21, 2020) <https://searchlightnm.org/fields-of-green/>

trafficking and uplifting and utilizing holistic solutions to do so is more important than ever.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs through its Office of Immigrant Affairs and Office of Labor Equity, in close consultation and collaboration with the Los Angeles County Regional Human Trafficking Task Force, and the Department of Public Health, including the Office of Women's Health, to provide the Board with a report back, in writing, in 90 days, regarding:

1. Past efforts in addressing human trafficking in the County;
2. The current state of affairs in the County as to abating and eliminating human trafficking and as to providing support to survivors, with specific attention to the issue of labor trafficking in impacted immigrant communities in the County, including the San Gabriel Valley and La Puente, and other areas such as Pomona;
3. An analysis of and recommendations about adopting a Countywide public health approach to combatting human trafficking;
4. Recommendations for actions on establishing a pilot worker's resource center in Monterey Park, including feasibility, necessary resources, existing resources, potential community-based organization partners, and other potential locations for future centers; and
5. . An analysis of and recommendations regarding establishing a Countywide human trafficking coordinating unit to integrate and harmonize the work of all County agencies and community-based organizations, including the Thai

Community Development Center, Saving Innocence, the Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking, and other non-government stakeholders relevant to the long-term mission of reducing and eliminating human trafficking in the County.

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