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Preventing Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters

Natural disasters have devastating and far-reaching consequences, displacing individuals, dismantling communities, and exacerbating vulnerabilities for those already at risk of exploitation. In the aftermath of such crises, individuals who have lost homes, jobs, transportation, and support networks become more susceptible to human trafficking - both sex and labor trafficking. Traffickers target displaced individuals to prey on their circumstances, offering fraudulent employment, housing, or other forms of assistance that ultimately entrap individuals in exploitative conditions.

The Los Angeles County (County) Board of Supervisors (Board) recognizes the urgent need to safeguard residents - particularly those from marginalized and underserved communities - from these dangers. Disruptions caused by wildfires can and do create conditions where labor abuses thrive, often in the form of coercive employment, wage theft, unsafe conditions, and forced labor in recovery and reconstruction efforts. Vulnerable populations, including undocumented workers, youth, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those fleeing domestic violence, are particularly at risk. Labor trafficking is most often seen during the recovery phase after a natural

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disaster, especially in domestic work, construction, and agriculture.¹ Additionally, in previous disasters, there has been an increase in commercial sexual exploitation, particularly around temporary shelters, emergency housing, and disaster recovery sites. For example, there was an increase in trafficking of children after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; several studies and reports indicated that up to 70% of workers experienced some form of labor exploitation, with a third of the workers having experienced outright labor trafficking, after Hurricane Harvey in Texas in 2017; and one of the largest labor trafficking cases in the U.S. came in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in which nearly 500 men were trafficked into the U.S. where they were forced to live in substandard conditions and paid sub-par wages.² Traffickers try to recruit people who have lost their jobs, or migrant workers through fraudulent offers, promising employment or residency.

In 2021, the National Human Trafficking Hotline reported that the most common industries involving labor trafficking included domestic servitude, agriculture, and construction.³ Research has shown that trafficking victims have been employed in hospitality and maid services to accommodate displaced residents.⁴ A 2024 study found that up to 32% of workers engaged in post-disaster recovery construction efforts had experienced labor trafficking. These workers paid illegal fees, had their pay withheld, and faced threats of violence or denunciation.

As the County moves to rebuild, it must ensure that its policies and practices address the dangers of human trafficking, which have been well-documented in rebuilding efforts. Given the evidence, the County needs to raise public awareness about the increased risk of human trafficking and play a critical role in educating community members on what trafficking looks like, and where to turn for help as rebuilding gets underway. We can follow the example of the city of Houston who set up toolkits, webinars,

¹ *Administration for Children and Families*, Department of Health and Human Services and National Human Trafficking. (2018) https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre-HTPRAP-natural-disasters-oct24_0.pdf

² <https://acf.gov/archive/blog/2022/09/preventing-and-addressing-human-trafficking-wake-disasters>

³ https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre-HTPRAP-natural-disasters-oct24_0.pdf

⁴ Loyola Law School. Protecting Workers From Trafficking In Disaster Relief Efforts <https://www.lls.edu/media/loyolalawschool/academics/clinicexperientiallearning/sji/publicationsandreports/Protecting%20Workers%20from%20Human%20Trafficking%20in%20Disaster%20Relief%20Efforts.pdf>

and targeted outreach campaigns after Hurricane Harvey aimed at preventing both sex and labor trafficking. To strengthen protections against trafficking, a multifaceted approach is required in the County, including enhanced enforcement mechanisms, increased public awareness, collaboration with community-based organizations, and ensuring that recovery efforts do not inadvertently enable exploitative labor practices.

Further, the County must review its disaster relief policies and ensure that recovery workers are trained to identify and address human trafficking as part of the relief efforts. Finally, the County must ensure that it uses its purchasing power to protect workers locally and globally from human trafficking. As such, the County should review its procurement policies to prevent trafficking in goods purchased as we rebuild.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Director of the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs' (DCBA) through the Office of Labor Equity and Office of Immigrant Affairs to take action within 30 days to augment resources to help prevent individuals economically impacted by the fires from becoming victims of human trafficking.
2. Direct the Director of DCBA to report back to the Board in writing in 60 days on the progress made on directive 1, the barriers encountered, and recommendations to overcome them.
 - a. This should include, but not be limited to, working with the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) to raise public awareness about human trafficking by leveraging the designated Impacted Worker and Family Recovery Centers and appropriate population serving locations (in partnership with the Los Angeles Worker Center Network) to provide information including "know-your-rights" trainings and education about the warning signs of trafficking.
 - b. The Director of DCBA should also coordinate with the LA Regional Human Trafficking Task Force, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Public Health's Office of Worker Safety and

Health, the Probation Department, to perform coordinated, targeted outreach and enforcement pursuant to forecasted and realized labor and human trafficking activity to deter and enforce against such activity. The community outreach and engagement should be done in a manner that is responsive to the language, cultural, and immigration status needs of the impacted communities. It should also be trauma-informed.

- i. Launch a targeted public awareness campaign to educate people, particularly those impacted by the fires, about how to identify signs of human and labor trafficking and how to report them;
 - ii. Work with existing human trafficking working groups, including the LA County Child Trafficking Steering Committee/CTLT (Child Trafficking Leadership Team), to raise awareness about trafficking in the aftermath of the recent fires.
3. Direct the Director of DCBA, and request the Sheriff and the District Attorney, to perform coordinated, targeted outreach, including to afflicted property owners, the construction trade unions and associations, and all contractors and third party employers registered with the County; to execute enforcement pursuant to forecasted and realized labor and human trafficking activity to deter and enforce against such activity; and to report back to the Board in writing in 60 days on progress.
4. Direct the Chief Executive Officer's Office of Emergency Management, in coordination with the Director of DCBA, to develop a plan to integrate the prevention of trafficking into the County's disaster relief efforts, which may include trainings for emergency response staff and the development of anti-trafficking material to highlight the risks of trafficking post-disaster; and to report back to the Board in writing in 30 days on progress.
5. Direct the Director of the Internal Services Department (ISD) in consultation with ~~and~~ County Counsel to report back in writing within 60 days on recommended changes to the Los Angeles County - Board of Supervisors Policy Manual to the

extent legally feasible to ensure County contractors are not participating in human trafficking in their practices or supply chains. ISD should consider adding any reviewed suggestions to their *Compliance with County's Zero Tolerance Policy on Human Trafficking* provision. At minimum, the report should consider:

- a. Incorporating the prohibition of "trafficking-related" activities by any contractor, such as:
 - i. Engaging in severe forms of trafficking of persons during the performance period of the contract.
 - ii. Using forced labor in the performance of the contract.
 - iii. Destroying, concealing, confiscating, or otherwise denying access by an employee to the employee's identity or immigration documents, including passports or drivers' licenses, regardless of issuing authority.
 - iv. Using misleading or fraudulent practices during the recruitment of employees or offering of employment.
 - v. Charging employees or potential employees recruitment fees.
 - vi. Providing or arranging housing that fails to meet the County's housing and safety standards.
 - vii. Failing to provide or pay for the cost of return transportation upon the end of employment,
 - viii. If required by law or contract, failing to provide an employment contract, recruitment agreement, or other required work document in writing.
- b. Review and consider similar standards of other jurisdictions, including but not limited to Title 48, Code of Federal Regulations, Subpart 22.17 – Combatting Trafficking in Persons & U.S. Federal Acquisition Regulation 52.222-50 Combating Trafficking in Persons.

- c. Making the violation of any of the proposed trafficking related prohibited activities, or a finding that the contractor has participated in trafficking immediate grounds for contractor debarment.
- 6. Direct the Director of DEO to identify applicable workforce training and employment programs, including possible partners with expertise serving this population and available funding sources for those at risk of or victims of labor trafficking in the wake of the January Firestorms including both temporary subsidized employment opportunities and High-Road career pathways and report back to the Board in writing in 45 days with recommended programs and industries for training and employment of this vulnerable population.

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