



Freedom Network USA

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The Freedom Network USA and the Human Trafficking Legal Center Joint Statement

The Freedom Network USA and the Human Trafficking Legal Center stand with trafficking survivors. We fight to prevent trafficking, prosecute traffickers, and seek justice for those who have suffered. The Trump Administration's cynical manipulation of human trafficking as a political pawn in the government shutdown cannot stand. For months, the Trump Administration has used the rhetoric of human trafficking "prevention" as cover for vicious attacks on all immigrants, including victims of trafficking. Under this Administration's policies, trafficking victims are more likely to be deported. Terrified, they are less likely to come forward to report to law enforcement.

A border wall will not stop traffickers. The government shutdown will harm trafficking victims.

The fight against human trafficking has long enjoyed bi-partisan support, an island of agreement in a sea of rancor. The Trump Administration should work to end the government shutdown and strengthen that consensus to end trafficking, not use trafficking as a political pawn to divide our communities.

The Freedom Network USA and the Human Trafficking Legal Center (HT Legal) call upon the Administration to embrace facts, and to end the politicized rhetoric about human trafficking. These are the facts:

1. Trafficking victims often enter the country legally at a port of entry, only to find themselves saddled with debt, subjected to threats, and forced into servitude. A wall will not prevent these legal entries, orchestrated by criminal traffickers. Nor will it prevent the forced labor and sex trafficking that follow. A perfect example of this phenomenon is the conviction of 36 defendants in a sex trafficking case recently prosecuted by the US Attorney's Office in Minnesota. Hundreds of trafficking victims from Thailand in the case entered the United States on visas obtained by their traffickers.

2. Many trafficking victims are U.S. citizens. Of those who are not, only a small proportion of foreign-national trafficking victims are smuggled across the southern border. For traffickers motivated by profit, a physical wall is no impediment. People desperate to cross the U.S. border will take more risks, placing them in greater danger of trafficking. The added expense and complexity of crossing the border will result in higher debts and greater vulnerability for trafficking victims who are brought into the country without documentation.

3. The government shutdown will soon result in a collapse in funding for programs that support trafficking victims. The Office of Justice Programs, which administers grants to fund support for trafficking victims, has funds to continue operating only through 5pm, Friday, January 18th. After that, funding will lapse, leaving trafficking victims abandoned by the federal government.

If the Administration truly seeks to fight human trafficking, it should take four steps:

a. Increase the number of T-visas issued to trafficking victims to remain in the United States. In FY2017, the Administration issued only 672 trafficking visas to allow victims to stay in the United States, down from 750 the year before.

b. Provide resources to the USCIS Vermont Service Center to adjudicate trafficking – or T – visas. The current wait time for a visa is between 15 and 22.5 months. In prior years, the wait time was less than 12 months.

c. Roll back policies – such as the Notice to Appear Policy – that have upended the trust that the government and anti-trafficking legal bar have developed over the last two decades. The Trump Administration has undercut immigration programs for trafficking survivors, while wielding the issue as a public relations weapon. Humanitarian visas, such as the T visa, exist to encourage victims to come forward and report abuses. These visas allow victims to stabilize their lives while they seek justice against the perpetrators. This, in turn, improves public safety for everyone. The Administration's actions have jeopardized twenty years of progress in combating trafficking. The Administration should implement evidence-based, not fear-based, policies.

d. Open the government. Trafficking victims are suffering, even as this Administration uses them as fodder in a manufactured crisis. On January 18th, when the federal programs run out of funds, that suffering will become even more profound.