

ALVIN — The state's fight against human trafficking made significant progress during this year's legislative session, but there is still work to be done, lawmakers told the Brazoria County United Front Coalition.

At its quarterly meeting Wednesday at Alvin Community College, Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, state Rep. Ed Thompson and state Sen. Larry Taylor visited to share information about new laws that will aid in preventing and ending human trafficking. Unbound Houston Executive Director Kerri Taylor also debuted the coalition's new logo, a shield, during the meeting.

"What we are here to do is to drive our stake in the ground of this county," Kerri Taylor said, adding the organization will act as a shield against the demand, recruitment and instances of human trafficking.

Bonnen spoke on behalf of bills state Sen. Joan Huffman carried through the session, he said. Huffman, R-Houston, is uniquely qualified as a former prosecutor and former judge to handle "rough, tough things," Bonnen said.

There are 234,000 victims of labor trafficking and 79,000 victims of youth and minor **sex trafficking** in Texas at any given time, he said.

"We will never solve these types of problems if we don't acknowledge that they exist and then go after addressing and stopping them," Bonnen said.

House Bill 1, the state budget, reserved \$27.8 million for human and child **sex trafficking investigative** squads, anti-gang squads and regional human trafficking **investigative** squads through the Texas Department of Public Safety, he said.

It also designated \$5.5 million for an anti-human-trafficking unit in the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, Bonnen said, and \$3.4 million for the expansion of the Office of the Attorney General's human trafficking prevention section.

"We did that because ... the authority we gave them is working, and if they had more resources, they could do more work with our local law enforcement agencies," Bonnen said of the attorney general's office.

The bill gave \$1.5 million for the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulations to create a human trafficking team to increase inspections at establishments with high risk of human trafficking, he said.

Senate Bill 20, which goes into effect Sunday, implements recommendations of the Texas Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force, Bonnen said. Huffman authored the bill, he said.

"It's a great bipartisan issue," Bonnen said.

The bill makes continuous human trafficking a stackable offense, meaning the convicted trafficker must finish serving a sentence for one offense before serving another, he said. The bill enhances community supervision for prostitution convictions and allows people to participate in commercially sexually exploited court programs, he said.

It enhances penalties for buyers of **sex trafficking**, with the first conviction a Class A misdemeanor, the second a state-jail felony and fourth conviction reportable to the sex offender registry, Bonnen said.

"I think it's the first time in Texas that we've said those who are going in and soliciting that prostitution ... they have a legal problem," he said. "It is a very significant step that the Texas Legislature made this session to hold those individuals accountable."

SB20 implements treatment programs for trafficking victims and establishes grants for **sex trafficking**

prevention programs, Bonnen said.

It prohibits state agencies from contracting with people who have been convicted of any offense related to the direct support and promotion of human trafficking, he said, meaning the state will not do business with anyone convicted of trafficking crimes.

The bill enhances the non-disclosure process for trafficking victims, meaning victims who engaged in crimes will get non-disclosure orders for crimes committed as part of their trafficking, Bonnen said.

The **Texas** Human Trafficking Task Force will be able to track felony convictions of buyers of sex and analyze that data because of the bill, he said, and prosecutors will be able to pursue online providers of prostitution and trafficked people.

The bill creates offenses of online promotion, which is a third-degree felony or second-degree felony if involving a child younger than 18, and aggravated online promotion, a second-degree felony or first-degree felony if involving a child younger than 18, Bonnen said.

This session also fixed an embarrassing issue for **Texas**, he said, through \$56.6 million designated to eliminate the statewide rape kit backlog and prevent there from being a backlog again.

Larry Taylor remembers his shock at learning human trafficking is happening in his own community, he said.

"I thought slavery ended over 150 years ago," the state senator said.

The community became more aware, but general awareness will not solve the problem, he said.

"You have to make people aware of what it looks like and how to identify it, because it's happening around us," Larry Taylor said.

Trafficking fronts could look like a massage parlor that is open at odd hours, he said, and the people are identifiable as well. The state has become involved by inspecting places and training bus drivers and other transportation workers, health care workers and school employees to know what to look for, Larry Taylor said.

House Bill 2059 requires human trafficking prevention training for health care providers, he said.

"What to look for, and then once you do see something you suspect that may be a victim, how to communicate with that person," he said. "There are ways of approaching that, and also, who to contact."

Thompson emphasized how important the community is in informing legislators about issues, including human trafficking.

"I don't know what I don't know," Thompson said.

People explaining these issues give legislators an opportunity to look into it and help, he said, and it had a lot to do with the laws passed this session to fight this "horrendous issue."

"Just because we had a really good session ... doesn't mean that you shouldn't continue to inform," Thompson said.

It is difficult to talk about, but those aware should inform their friends and neighbors, he said.

"They have an opportunity to make a difference, and hopefully we've given them some tools to be able to do that," he said.

Larry Taylor congratulated Brazoria County on everything community members have done so far to fight human trafficking and facing the issue head-on. Law enforcement, school authorities and others in the county work together on things like this, he said.

"We will stamp it out in Brazoria County and we will be an example for the rest of the state to follow," Larry Taylor said. "Keep up the good work. You are making a difference for Texas and for all of our citizens."

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