

## Human rights advocates pushing for anti-trafficking laws



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Human rights advocates are urging the state Legislature to enact stronger anti-trafficking laws in New York State this session.

The New York State Anti-Trafficking Coalition, a group comprised of members from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Equality Now, GEMS, and the National Organization for Women-NYC, sponsored a rally earlier this month after launching its 2007 campaign on Jan. 4 for a strong anti-trafficking law.

Human trafficking, as defined by the coalition, is the buying and selling of women, men or children to be used in the commercial sex industry or in various forms of labor.

Twenty-seven states have already passed legislation regarding human trafficking, however the coalition is concerned that New York, a prominent point of U.S. entry, is falling behind. Jacqui Williams, director of policy and education for the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said, "New York State is an originator for trafficked individuals."

Williams described an incident in which a woman from Sri Lanka was approached by an elderly man who offered to bring her to America. Instead he took her to the Middle East, forcing her into a life of sexual servitude. When she refused to have sex with him, she was raped. She became pregnant and bore two of his children.

In another incident Williams described how a woman named Katya answered an advertisement in a Russian newspaper which advertised for a nanny in New York City. Katya, being unemployed at the time, saw it as an opportunity to improve her life. Upon arriving at John F. Kennedy International Airport, she was approached by gentleman in the agency who put out the ad. They confiscated her passport and told her that the nanny position was no longer available; however she would owe money for the travel expenses they paid for her to come to New York.

Katya was given an option to work for a strip club in New Jersey or a massage parlor in Brooklyn. She eventually managed to escape prostitution by entering into a relationship with an organized crime leader, but was still forced to sexually obey him. Katya was eventually referred to the services of the coalition by a police officer.

The coalition described the benefits of having a strong anti-trafficking law in New York. These include being able to define trafficking, creating stronger penalties for traffickers, addressing those who patronize the sex industry, clarifying existing sex tourism laws to end sex tours in New York, having available help for trafficking victims and providing services to help victims rehabilitate their lives.

Dan Werner, legal director for the Workers Rights Law Center of New York, said human trafficking is like slavery, which is not considered a crime in New York. "It exists in New York State because there is a demand," he said. "Unless using slaves is made immensely more expensive there will always be a demand."

Werner described two cases in which men fell victim to human trafficking. In one incident, which later became a civil law suit, a group of hundreds of immigrant men and boys were enslaved by a family of labor contractors from Western New York. One night a group of them managed to escape, and were found wandering aimlessly in the woods when police rescued them. The contractors were forced to serve jail time, however the business which employed them did not face harsh penalties.

The second case Werner represented took place in 2004, when a man named Jose was lured into a construction contractor's van, with promises of a decent paying job. The contractor stole Jose's identification documents, and refused to return them or pay him, forcing Jose to continue working for the contractor.

Jose was not physically restrained from leaving the construction site, however without money or identification papers, he had nowhere to go. After the contractor punched him in the face, Jose finally fled, a year and a half later filing a complaint against the contractor. The contractor was arrested but charges were dropped because of the state's statute of limitations—one year.

Because Jose was physically able to leave his entrapment, the contractor was not charged with kidnapping. Werner described this act as slavery and said that since there are not defined laws against the contractor's behavior in New York the District Attorney decided to drop all charges.

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