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MAHONING COUNTY PROSECUTOR GINA DEGENOVA TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF HOUSE BILL 473

Before the House Homeland Security Committee
Representative Haraz Ghanbari, Chair

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Good morning, Chair Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Ohio House Homeland Security Committee, my name is Gina DeGenova and I am the Prosecuting Attorney for Mahoning County. I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill (HB) 473, legislation requiring the installation and maintenance of a system of security cameras at each rest area over which the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) has jurisdiction.

The International Labour Organization estimates that as many as 28 million men, women and children are exploited in various forms of trafficking. And that forced labor trafficking generates around 236 billion dollars world-wide annually.

As of June, 2022, Ohio ranks 5th in the nation for human trafficking incidents. However, our state's rate of human trafficking is around 3.84 victims per 100,000 residents – making Ohio the 4th worst state in the nation. Ohio is more susceptible to human trafficking as it includes large cities and rural counties, as well as five major highways that connect it to other states and Canada making it easier for traffickers to recruit victims and use Ohio as a rest stop.

Studies show that human traffickers often use transportation hubs to recruit victims of sex trafficking. Once recruited, traffickers rely on transportation systems to transport victims to places where they will be abused and exploited. These locations

are often insulated from local communities, making them convenient places for transient customers to purchase sex with minimal concerns of detection. Because these locations are also geographically isolated, it is difficult for victims to leave their situations and allows traffickers to quickly and frequently move victims without interference or undue attention. Additionally, traffickers reap significant profits by making commercial sex accessible to a customer base of male truckers and travelers willing to pay.

Over 10 years ago, the Dayton Daily news published a story about several trafficking victims who were rescued after being spotted at a rest stop. According to this report, a rest stop's caretaker witnessed a young female acting strange, so he contacted law enforcement who confirmed that the young woman was reported missing by her mother several days earlier. This tip ultimately led to the apprehension of her trafficker who was also traveling with another young woman.

Spotting victims of human trafficking can be challenging due to the fact that they are often isolated by their traffickers and have well prepared stories when approached.

Over the years, various states have unveiled campaigns on how to spot human trafficking when it happens and what to do if you see something concerning. Many of these initiatives involved rest stops.

For example, a few years ago, Penn Dot began using window clings at 56 rest areas and welcome centers around Pennsylvania to demonstrate the universal hand signal for help. A hand gesture where you curl your thumb into your palm and fold your fingers over it. A second window cling reminds the public to "see, call, save" meaning if people see signs of human trafficking in PA, they should call authorities and potentially save a life.

Other states place signage and informational brochures at rest stops and even within restrooms to help visitors look for and identify potential victims of human trafficking.

In 2018, the US Department of Transportation launched an advisory committee on Human Trafficking to develop best practices for states and local transportation stakeholders to help combat human trafficking.

The commercial trucking industry has launched similar campaigns to identify the signs of human trafficking. For instance, the National Association of Truck Stop Owners, commonly referred to as NATSO, offers free online training to teach truck stop owners, operators and employees how to respond if human trafficking is suspected. In addition, Truckers Against Trafficking recognizes that truckers, along

with other members of the transportation industry, are perfectly positioned in the course of their everyday jobs to provide an extra set of eyes and ears to law enforcement in helping to identify both victims and perpetrators of human trafficking. The very nature of their jobs, involving extensive travel, the variety of venues they visit, and their sheer numbers – creates opportunities for members of this industry to interact with potential victims of human trafficking regularly.

Truckers Against Trafficking has trained over 1 million truck drivers as of 2020 including drivers licensed in Ohio.

Here in Ohio, as of January, 2016, individuals seeking a commercial drivers license or CDL will be required to take a one-hour training course on human trafficking. As of this same date, all current CDL holders were issued Truckers Against Trafficking (TAT) wallet card. According to the Ohio State Highway Patrol, “engaging truckers in the war against human trafficking is their best chance at fighting back.”

These initiatives and training campaigns help individuals spot human trafficking and give clear instructions on how to report it. But making a report is only the first step. Once the report is made, law enforcement has to act fast. Especially when reports are coming from a rest stop where people are simply passing by and a possible trafficker may already be back on the road.

Having cameras present can provide critical pieces of missing information like the make or model of a vehicle or even a license plate number. They can give a description that a witness may not be able to provide. Video footage could also serve as evidence in court, should a trafficker be identified, arrested, and criminally charged.

That is not to say that eyewitness reports are not important. They are. They often provide vital information to help locate and rescue those who are victims of human trafficking. But eyewitnesses also pose challenges to law enforcement who are tracking down potential predators and to prosecutors who are responsible for ensuring that offenders are appropriately charged and brought to justice.

Human beings are just that, humans. Their memories are often susceptible to a variety of errors and biases. They (like the rest of us) can make errors in remembering specific details, and their memories may fade over time. Eyewitness testimony has historically been the subject of aggressive cross-examination and scrutiny at trial. In addition, there is no shortage of so-called “experts” in the field of eyewitness identification who can be hired by criminal defendants to testify that eyewitness identifications are unreliable. Eyewitnesses also become unavailable, particularly witnesses who are, due to their employment, somewhat transient.

On the other hand, camera footage doesn't lie. Surveillance cameras capture events in real time and in unfiltered form. Properly preserved, recordings last forever.

Video recordings add credibility and corroboration to accounts given by human beings and can capture incidents when no one else is around. They also fill in the blanks where someone's memory may fail or a witness becomes unavailable. Details that may seem unimportant to a casual observer will be captured and used by law enforcement officers and prosecutors who recognize the behaviors and patterns commonly displayed by traffickers and their victims.

The installation of cameras as proposed by H.B. 473 will serve as a vital tool, not only in the war against human trafficking but in the pursuit of justice for other crimes too.

Chair Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Ohio House Homeland Security Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this legislation. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.