

Improving Anti-trafficking Coordination Across Local, State, and Federal Government

By Jane Mosbacher Morris and Stephen P. Wong

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It is estimated that up to 17,500 victims are trafficked into the United States every year (1); in 2011, over 19,000 calls were received by the federally-funded National Human Trafficking Hotline (2); and 83% of confirmed sex trafficking victims were identified as U.S. citizens (3). This sampling of numbers gives a hint of the extent of the trafficking problem, but fails to highlight another major challenge—the difficulty in countering trafficking across America’s disparate levels of government.

A trafficker is incentivized to force his or her victim across city, state, or national boundaries for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to avoid detection. A new physical environment helps to disorient a victim and isolate him or her from family and friends, deepening the victim’s dependency on the trafficker. In many cases, traffickers take away a victim’s identification documents and financial instruments, making it extremely challenging to travel home if a victim is lucky enough to escape.

Despite the transient nature of trafficking, traditional jurisdictions and boundary lines, coupled with antiquated interagency collaboration mechanisms, continue to hamper the efforts of city, state, and federal law enforcement and government service providers.

For example, a trafficker may come under suspicion of law enforcement in county A, but then may move to county B, where the lack of communication across agencies allows him or her to be essentially anonymous in county B. Similarly, a victim may move through state A’s child welfare system as a sexually exploited youth, only to be arrested in state B and end up in the justice system due to the lack of inter-agency communication.

The communication and coordination breakdown often worsens between local, state and federal entities, as trafficking-related federal databases often include “classified” information on perpetrators to which local or state law enforcement do not have access.

To mitigate the inefficiencies that our federalist system inadvertently creates in the counter-trafficking space, two intentional steps can be taken to bridge these gaps and allow our law enforcement and government service providers to operate more seamlessly.

Leveraging local, state, and federal task forces represents a sporadically implemented, yet simple and effective mechanism for increasing communication and collaboration across different levels of governments. Outside of the government, domestic violence activists have made great strides in addressing domestic violence

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through prevention and service provision by utilizing local and state task forces (or working groups) operating under a national umbrella. In the human trafficking space, some task forces exist on the state or local level, but are rarely coordinated within the same state, let alone across states or with the federal government. Task forces not only can allow for real-time law enforcement and service provider collaboration, but also can serve a longer term purpose of measuring counter-trafficking efforts’ effectiveness; convening general stakeholder meetings and hearings to raise awareness about trafficking, and advising policy-makers on the state of trafficking within their community.

A second opportunity to better synchronize our government’s counter-trafficking efforts is to leverage existing intelligence fusion centers. The federal government funded the creation of several domestic fusion centers post-9/11 with the original intent of sharing counterterrorism-related intelligence (4). These fusion centers are capable of merging human trafficking-related intelligence, as well. However, many state and local databases that contain valuable trafficking-related intelligence are not connected to other information-sharing databases, including these fusion centers, thus isolating the local or state information and preventing a comprehensive trafficking picture from being painted.

America’s federalist system reflects the founder’s worthy intentions of dispersing the government’s power across the national, state, and local levels. An unintended consequence of our multi-layered structure, though, is the challenge it creates in coordinating each layer of gov-

ernment. Establishing integrated task forces and taking advantage of existing intelligence fusion centers represent two practical suggestions for overcoming organizational deficiencies in countering domestic trafficking. Until we can work out how to bridge jurisdiction and boundary lines, human traffickers will continue to exploit our stovepipes and communication barriers, leaving victims to fall through the cracks.

Jane Mosbacher Morris is the Director of Humanitarian Action at the McCain Institute for International Leadership, where she manages the Institute’s human trafficking efforts. She previously worked at the U.S. Department of State on counterterrorism, as well as on women, peace, and security.

Stephen P. Wong works in the McCain Institute’s Humanitarian Action program and previously worked at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is interested in the intersection of domestic and foreign policy.

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