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Annie Garnett: Human trafficking must end

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When Americans hear the word slavery they think of the horrible racial injustice of the past. Most do not realize that human slavery continues in full force today. In fact, more people are enslaved now than during any other period of human history, and the numbers are still growing.

Modern slavery, also known as human trafficking, is one of the fastest growing criminal industries in the world. According to International Labour Organization estimates, at any time there are 20.9 million victims of human slavery worldwide. Children (ages 17 and below) make up an estimated 26 percent of the victims, roughly 5.5 million.

Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to exploit individuals for sex or labor, continually taking advantage of human beings for their own financial gain. The act of using trafficked individuals as a source of profit violates basic human rights and the dignity of the human person, and it must be stopped.

Traffickers often target vulnerable populations when choosing victims — the abused, runaway or homeless youth, undocumented or temporary workers and the economically vulnerable — but are not limited to victims of a specific citizenship, gender, age, or social class. They often lure individuals with false promises, offering opportunities to receive a good education, a job or even love. Traffickers abuse and threaten the victims, and confiscate identification documents to keep them in the horrific situation.

Michigan cannot ignore this affront to human dignity. Positioned on an international border, this state is especially susceptible to human trafficking. Each month, an estimated 150 girls under the age of 18 are sold into trafficking. Sex and labor trafficking takes place across all industries, and can even be present in private homes. Trafficking is difficult to address because most victims do not self-identify. Every community needs assistance recognizing the signs, such as unwillingness to speak in front of others, lack of control over finances or keeping unusual hours.

Michigan elected officials are currently examining human trafficking and its legislative solutions. In March, Attorney General Bill Schuette announced the formation of the Michigan Commission on Human Trafficking, a bipartisan group that brings together elected officials, agency heads, law enforcement, and legal experts to discuss the problem. The commission will release its report with recommendations in the fall.

In addition to the statewide commission, four Michigan Senators, Judy Emmons (R-Sheridan), Minority Leader Gretchen Whitmer (D-East Lansing), Tonya Schuitmaker (R-Lawton) and Rebekah Warren (D-Ann Arbor), have come together in a bipartisan manner to address the topic. On Thursday, May 2, this bipartisan group will host a Human Trafficking Day at the Capitol to raise awareness about the problem.

In order to make strides against this form of hidden slavery, Michigan citizens can work to educate themselves and each other to help the state combat human trafficking. Every person is deserving of respect and human dignity, and has the right to live free from abuse, wherever it takes place. To report suspected cases, call the National Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.