

## **New Massachusetts State Police unit will investigate child sex trafficking**

BOSTON — A new state police unit has been formed to investigate the sex trafficking of children. For the first time in Massachusetts, a child who has been a victim of sexual trafficking will now be treated as a victim of child abuse and cannot be prosecuted as a prostitute.

"This is an issue we need to bring to the forefront," said Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, in announcing the initiatives on Tuesday. "When you think about the sexual exploitation of a child, this is a crime in Massachusetts, this is a violent act, this is child abuse."

The changes are the result of a law that was signed by former Gov. Deval Patrick in 2014 and are just now being implemented.

State officials say before the law change, a young woman who was forced into prostitution was at risk of being prosecuted. "Perpetrators of human trafficking have hid behind the fact that we weren't treating the youth as victims, we were treating them as part of the overall problem," said Public Safety Secretary Daniel Bennett.

Now, a woman who was trafficked cannot be prosecuted but will be treated as a victim. The state's Department of Children and Families has implemented a new policy, in which someone who suspects that a child is being trafficked is required to file a report. DCF is setting up teams that are now in five counties and will be expanded to all counties by the fall of 2018, which will work with non-profits to respond to these cases and provide services to the children. DCF will have to refer all cases of alleged trafficking to a district attorney for investigation, including when the person exploiting the child is a caregiver.

"What we're saying is that this is a form of child abuse and needs to be reported to DCF. They need to investigate it, provide services and supports to the child to get them out of that life and also ensure that criminal justice prosecutes the individuals who are exploiting the kids," said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders.

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DCF has received a five-year, \$1.25 million federal grant to establish these teams and to provide assistance to each county and to DCF in developing policies and services to help trafficking victims. DCF already upgraded its systems to better track allegations of human trafficking of individuals for labor and for sex.

The state police is also setting up a four-person team, led by Detective Lt. Pi Downsborough, to investigate human trafficking cases involving children under age 18. The state police will be the lead agency on larger investigations, and the team will provide support to municipal police forces in smaller investigations. For example, the state police might provide expertise in wiretapping that a town police force does not have. The teams will work with a human trafficking task force that is part of Attorney General Maura Healey's office. Anyone convicted of human trafficking is subject to a mandatory minimum sentence of five years and as much as 20 years in state prison.

Downsborough said the new human trafficking police team started its work around six weeks ago.

Bennett said when the state begins using the new unit to prosecute people, it will send a message to other traffickers. "Nothing spreads among the criminals in this state faster than time spent at Souza-Baranowski," Bennett said, referring to the state prison.

According to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, over 1,300 human trafficking calls have been reported in Massachusetts since 2007, mostly involving adult women.

Polito said child sexual trafficking is underreported, and state officials believe that number does not reflect the actual prevalence of trafficking. "It's an activity that's very much in the shadows," Polito said.

By: Shira Schoenberg