

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE JUDICIARY STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 15, 2023

1:01 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Sarah Vance, Chair  
Representative Jamie Allard, Vice Chair  
Representative Ben Carpenter  
Representative Craig Johnson  
Representative David Eastman  
Representative Andrew Gray  
Representative Cliff Groh

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): Priceless Alaska

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): MY House

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

GWEN ADAMS, Executive Director  
Priceless Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint presentation on human sex trafficking.

MICHELLE OVERSTREET, Executive Director  
MY House  
Wasilla, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "The Fight Against Human Trafficking in Alaska."

## **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[1:01:02 PM](#)

**CHAIR SARAH VANCE** called the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. Representatives Carpenter, Eastman, Gray, Groh, Allard, and Vance were present at the call to order. Representative C. Johnson arrived as the meeting was in progress.

### **PRESENTATION(S): Priceless Alaska**

[Includes discussion of HB 68.]

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CHAIR VANCE announced that the first order of business would be a presentation by Priceless Alaska on human sex trafficking.

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GWEN ADAMS, Executive Director, Priceless Alaska, gave a PowerPoint presentation on human sex trafficking. She explained that Priceless Alaska began in 2012, working with law enforcement connections to provide clothing and supplies to those brought in on arrest for prostitution. From this, she said that Priceless began working with victims of trafficking, and it has witnessed 235 survivors since the onset. She described the work as "dark, hard, and relentless." She posed the question, as seen on slide 1, "Why would anyone oppose efforts to end human trafficking?" She moved to slide 2 and pointed out that some think prostitution is another form of work and should be legalized. Moving to slide 3, she put forth the arguments of why prostitution is unsafe, as many are raped, abused, and exposed to diseases such as HIV and AIDS. She argued that it is impossible to alleviate harms in prostitution by simply putting safety measures in place.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 5 and slide 6, pointing out that prostitution is the gateway to trafficking. She argued that prostitution is a form of modern-day slavery. She indicated that where prostitution is legalized in the world, the exploitation of children has grown there. She moved to slide 7 and slide 8 and argued that prostitution is not about women's empowerment and free choice, and she expressed the understanding that the vast majority of people involved in prostitution wished "they could get out."

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MS. ADAMS moved to slide 9 and slide 10, which addressed the argument that people should be free to purchase sex. She expressed the understanding that buyers do not know if the sex worker is underage or coerced into the work, as victims would be purchased the same way as a free-lance prostitute. She argued that buyers are fueling this modern-day slavery; therefore, they must be punished as well.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 10 and stated that the crime of trafficking never goes away if safety for victims cannot be provided. She stated that safety means that victims would not face repercussions from traffickers for providing testimony and that they are free from going back into the trade. She described this as an "endless game," as traffickers are in endless pursuit to bring "merchandise" back. She stated the providing safety would be the way to help these individuals not return to the trade.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 11 and stated that if financial benefits to trafficking are not ended, the crime will persist. She reiterated that if buyers are not stopped, trafficking will continue. She suggested that the average trafficker earns \$200,000 per year, per victim. She stressed that this amount of money puts her own life into danger as she attempts to help victims. She stated that trafficking is second only to drugs as the most lucrative form of income for cartels. She pointed out that drugs and guns can be sold once, while victims of sex trafficking can be sold multiple times a day.

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MS. ADAMS moved to slide 12 and stated that Alaska is considered to be a trafficking origination point. She explained that this means this is a state where traffickers come from out of state because Alaska's population is vulnerable. She stated that the U.S. and Mexico are considered to be number one in the world for trafficking. She pointed out that a vulnerable population is created in the state by the high rates of childhood sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and more. She indicated that those who have spent time in the foster care system are also vulnerable. She discussed the vulnerability linked with people not living on the road system, suggesting that Alaska is a "hotbed" for pre-groomed victims. She stated that individuals

who have already experienced some sort of abuse are considered to be pre-groomed.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 12 and reiterated the importance of a close partnership between organizations like Priceless Alaska and law enforcement. She stressed that law enforcement needs the tools to fight this, along with plans that are built on trust and hope with victims. She stated that traffickers will not be caught unless victims are willing to testify.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 13 and discussed how Priceless Alaska helps. She expressed the opinion that Alaska has the resources to help victims, but it is "terrible at networking resources." She stated that Priceless is a networking agency, and this was the reason for creating the agency. She stated that through the agency individuals are able to "walk with a victim of trafficking." The agency provides each person two mentors and a case manager. She stated that often this team is the first healthy support network that victims have ever had. She stated that recidivism rates plummeted when this practice was put into place. She further explained how this model works.

MS. ADAMS moved to slide 15 through slide 17, giving the examples of three women's stories. She stated that each woman was asked to describe "hope." She read the quoted statements on each slide. She stated that Priceless Alaska's effort is centered around what the victims have expressed as their hope and dreams, not what the organization thinks the victim needs.

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MS. ADAMS concluded the presentation. She pointed out that the proposed legislation [HB 68] is coming before the legislature, and it is addressing some "big" needs. She stated that she has been involved with the creation of the proposed legislation and recommended that it would help address expunging the record of prostitution for victims of trafficking, as this is a lifetime record. She noted that patrons are only getting "a slap on the back of the wrist," with no record. She stated that currently there is only a 24-hour notice before the release of a trafficker, and the legislation is requesting that there be a 72-hour notice to victims. She argued that the buyers of sex also need to be held responsible if they are "feeding trafficking," for example by purchasing a child. She noted that her name and Priceless Alaska has been dragged through the "mud" for various reasons by those lobbying against it. She

reiterated that there are people who opposed to the fight against trafficking.

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The committee took a brief at-ease.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY acknowledged that the legalization of prostitution in a society would cause more sex trafficking.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER expressed the understanding that not all the events in the state get reported. He questioned the scale of sex trafficking in Alaska.

MS. ADAMS responded that from the data she has seen, only a very small percentage of victims go and seek justice, and this is because of fear. She stated that across the country the vast majority of sex trafficking cases end up as domestic violence cases. She suggested that law enforcement and first-line responders be trained to ask better questions and learn bruising patterns to understand if a person is being trafficked. From this, she said that individuals could be referred to Priceless Alaska. She stated that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has reported that in six high schools in Alaska there has been incidents of minors trafficking minors. She stated that from townhall meetings held in villages, most people do not know what a trafficking victim is. She expressed the opinion that a majority of runaway cases are trafficking cases, as the runaway left with a person who they think they are in a relationship with. In response to a follow-up question, she stated that since 2012 she has worked with 245 victims.

REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER referenced Alaska State Trooper data, pointing out that there have only been 85 charges of trafficking, with 20 convictions since around 2012.

MS. ADAMS expressed the desire for the victims to be able to testify against the traffickers; however, she stated that it is rare for the victims to have the confidence to do this.

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MS. ADAMS, in response to a request of Priceless Alaska's process, stated that first there is a screening, as there must be a legitimate story of trafficking. She stated that next

there would be an intake process, and the individual would be assigned a mentor team and case manager. She reiterated that the organization is client directive, so the case is built around what the victim needs. She stated that before any funding can be given to the victim, the paperwork must be processed; therefore, funding at this time comes from Priceless. She responded that this takes a month to six weeks.

CHAIR VANCE noted that words like force, fraud, and coercion are important concerning human trafficking. She requested a description of what these words look like to someone who is being trafficked.

MS. ADAMS related a story of a victim who never met the trafficker, as it was all done over the internet. She had befriended someone who came across as a potential boyfriend, and he asked for pictures and videos. It came out that he was a fraud, and she was blackmailed. From this she felt forced to be a prostitute. She stated that this is an example of force, fraud, and coercion. She added that fear is a driving factor behind all of this. She provided another case example of the use of fear.

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MS. ADAMS, in response to a committee question, confirmed that in six high schools in Alaska, minors are trafficking minors. For example, she explained that a boyfriend would tell his girlfriend to sleep with a man for cash or drugs. She stated that often the exchange is for drugs. She reiterated that traffickers look for vulnerable or addicted individuals.

MS. ADAMS, in response to a committee question, expressed the understanding that the high schools mentioned are the six in Anchorage. She listed these schools. She responded that there has been an aggressive presence in the schools over the past year concerning training around trafficking. She stated that this has "not been an easy sell;" however, this is now being addressed as "safety training" so students are taught to recognize a predator.

REPRESENTATIVE ALLARD suggested that the proposed parental rights bill could include some cautionary training that parents could opt into.

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CHAIR VANCE mentioned legislation passed last year concerning "sextortion," as this addresses many things described in the presentation, such as exchanged photos used as blackmail. She acknowledged that currently this can be classified as domestic violence. She advised the committee that these things are likely happening in every high school and middle school in the state, and she added that children are vulnerable. She advised that trafficking is occurring, and not only in the adult context. She suggested that good laws need to be passed.

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MS. ADAMS, in response to a committee question, stated that minors trafficking minors are usually one-off events, such as a group of men behind a 13-year-old trafficker. She expressed the opinion that the unlimited use of the internet is the main cause of trafficking in youth. She added that as the state has better connectivity with the internet, this would become worse, especially since the laws in the state are not effective.

MS. ADAMS, in response to a committee question, stated that there needs to be recognition that Alaska is a trafficking origination point, with the vast majority of victims taken out of state. To understand vulnerabilities, she suggested a focus on the foster care system. She stated that 700 youth aging out of the system without finding a home creates vulnerability. She expressed the understanding that 40 percent of those aging out of foster care end up on the street, with 100 percent of these approached by traffickers. She offered the advice that for this to change "other areas of brokenness" need to be addressed. She reiterated that 40 percent of teenagers who age out of the state's foster care system are homeless, with 100 percent of these approached by traffickers. She expressed uncertainty concerning the number who are recruited.

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MS. ADAMS, in response to a committee question, stated that her prime motivation is to end trafficking. She expressed frustration with the argument that prostitution is a victimless crime. She suggested that the burden should be put on the buyers of sex, as these people should be aware that they may be purchasing a child or a person who has been repeatedly forced. She argued that if the patrons are not asking the right questions, they should be "behind bars."

MS. ADAMS, in response to a follow-up question, stated that she has the same beliefs concerning child pornography. She expressed the understanding that with better internet connectivity throughout the state, there will be an increase of child pornography, as it is very lucrative.

Chair Vance offered closing comments on the presentation.

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The committee took an at-ease from 1:56 p.m. to 1:57 p.m.

**PRESENTATION(S) : MY House**

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CHAIR VANCE announced that the final order of business would be the presentation by MY House on human sex trafficking.

MICHELLE OVERSTREET, Executive Director, MY House, provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "The fight Against Human Trafficking in Alaska," [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She stated that MY House serves youth from age 14 to age 26. She noted that the director of MY House is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice and by fundraisers. She pointed out the director's bio on slide 2, noting that from the age of 17 she suffered 7 years of sexual assault.

MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 3 and pointed out that she started MY House in 2009. She pointed out that at that time she knew nothing of homeless youth; however, as a master's level councilor, she knew that Alaska had the highest rates of domestic violence, abuse, rape, and sexual assault. She expressed the understanding that many victims have been trafficked by families and groomed by domestic violence and assault, and this creates harder situations for police to be involved in. From their stories, she has learned that youth are often consistently abused by adults who say they are "helping" them. She noted that helping the staff at MY House are an assigned FBI agent, an Alaska State Trooper taskforce, and an extra patrol from the Wasilla Police Department.

MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 4 and slide 5, titled "MY House Trafficking Data." She noted that out of its 456 clients, 42 have reported as being sex trafficked. She pointed out the MY House definitions of sex trafficking and labor trafficking, as seen on the slide. She discussed the questions asked during the

intake process at MY House, as these lead to understanding the needs of victims. She pointed out that the number of clients who have reported being trafficked has doubled over the last 27 months. She expressed the belief that these numbers have risen because of activities on the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that domestic violence does not easily fool authorities and staff any longer.

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MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 6, addressing the questions of how trafficking happens and who it happens to. She stated that the two case managers at MY House see an average of 100 youth a week. On the slide she gave examples of how grooming groundwork is laid out for victims. She noted that risk factors for [easy grooming] are present in Alaska. She urged the committee that better laws are needed. She moved to slide 7 which listed MY House statistics for its clients. These statistics include that 76 percent of its clients have reported experiencing domestic violence. She expressed the opinion that over 90 percent of the clients have experienced substance abuse.

MS. OVERSTREET discussed wrap around services to survivors, as seen on slide 8. These include on-site case management, transitional supported housing, substance abuse treatment, high school completion, paid job training, and more.

MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 9 and discussed the Alaska Stop Human Trafficking Alliance (ASHTA). She stated ASHTA has four top areas of focus for youth, which include education and age-appropriate curriculum. She expressed the opinion that the SPEAK UP program has promise in the state. She discussed the People's First Initiative and the flyers posted at the Alaska State Fair to raise awareness of trafficking. She added that the Alaska State Fair is the highest single point of trafficking in the state. She continued listing ASHTA's efforts in bringing awareness to sex trafficking in the state. She moved to slide 10, which showed an example of a flyer distributed at the Alaska State Fair.

MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 11, titled "Why it is so important to pass HB 68 from a survivor's stand point?" She explained that the proposed legislation would provide greater legal protections to victims by expunging records of trafficked victims. She explained the difficulties for these individuals as they try to recover from something that they had not chosen, but for which the record follows them. She stated that HB 68

would also increase penalties for buyers of sex to a Class B sex felony, if under 18, and a Class C felony, if over 18. She added that these individuals would be required to register as sex offenders. She argued that the legislation should be passed "sooner rather than later," as more victims will "fall through the cracks."

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MS. OVERSTREET moved to slide 12 and played a video of a young, anonymous victim discussing her experiences.

MS. OVERSTREET concluded on slide 13 and slide 14. She argued that lawmakers may only have two or three times to make a difference for youth, and this is one of these times. She expressed the importance for victims to be able to identify and testify against traffickers. She acknowledged that this is an uncomfortable topic that is easy to discard. She expressed the understanding that part of this is because people who are involved do not want others to know.

MS. OVERSTREET stated that out of the 42 clients who have reported an experience in sex trafficking, no traffickers have been prosecuted. She stressed that even with an assigned FBI agent and extra police patrols, a charge has never been brought. She suggested that when traffickers give victims drugs, this is "a get out of jail free card," because a victim's testimony would then be considered compromised. She argued that these perpetrators need to be incarcerated, otherwise they will kill their victims.

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CHAIR VANCE thanked the presenter and noted the highly uncomfortable nature of the discussion.

MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a request from Chair Vance, explained that for many of the clients, grooming looks like a boyfriend who wants to take care of the victim by giving them nice things. She stated that for low-income clients this is a "Cinderella story." She stated that after some weeks or months of this type of treatment, the trafficker will then tell the victim that there is some kind of financial crunch, with the solution being that the victim engages in prostitution "just this once." She suggested that this usually starts out innocuous, but in a short amount of time the victim then becomes

indebted to an unimaginable extent. She further discussed why and how people are being trapped by traffickers.

MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a follow-up request concerning the signs of trafficking, suggested that parents should look at their child's phone every day. Concerning gaming, she pointed out two games that were designed by pedophiles, who were grooming in the chatrooms of the game. She explained that this is why education in schools is important, as youth need to be taught that people talking on a game are not always another 12-year-old. She suggested that parents should talk to their children about who their friends are and what their friends are doing. She suggested putting a tracker on the phone if the child is sneaking out at night. She also noted if the child comes home with expensive gifts, this is a red flag.

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MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a request for examples of preschoolers molested or trafficked by parents, stated that these clients are generally youth who eventually run away from home. She stated that clients with parents who are perpetrators have a loyalty to the parents, as the victim has been raised to keep the secret, but also, this is the same type of fear generated from traffickers. She pointed out that these would be the pre-groomed children. She expressed the understanding that Alaska rates of child abuse and violence fuel this.

MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a follow-up question, stated that education would help because it increases the understanding that the victim is not alone, as it happens to other children too. Education would also help the understanding that this behavior is harmful and not normal. She suggested that counselling in schools can intervene and pickup on clues that otherwise may be missed. She pointed out that Alaska is big, and many organizations do not do a good job of networking with community partners. She concluded that education is the bottom line.

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MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a committee question, stated that MY House is a mandatory reporter. In regard to whether the organization is culpable for not reporting, she expressed uncertainty because this has never happened, adding that the challenge is not necessarily in the reporting, and she related a story concerning this and how a youth fell "through the cracks." She pointed out how many entities that serve youth, such as the

Office of Children Services (OCS), are not trained to see instances of trafficking, and she reiterated that there should be mandatory training on sex trafficking for those who work with youth.

MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a follow-up question concerning responsibility for mandatory reporting, stated that this is on the radar for MY House staff. She expressed the understanding that OCS does not have the staff to deal with 16- and 17-year-olds who are in trouble. She argued that some of these teenagers are the most vulnerable people and should receive services. She stated that there is a way for MY House to put 17-year-olds in transitional housing if they are at risk. She added that extra housing is being built to do this. She stated that the organization is reporting these instances, but it does not have the same capacity as state organizations.

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MS. OVERSTREET, in response to a committee question concerning the age of consent of 16 years old, expressed the wish that it had stayed at 17 years old, as this would give an extra year for the maturing process. She stated that the general rule is, if a youth is in three years of the older individual, this is consent, unless there is evidence of grooming. She discussed the strategic relationship between MY House and the police department in Wasilla.

CHAIR VANCE referenced the bill that recently raised the age for missing persons to 21 years old. She commented that this age group would still be vulnerable to coercion. She expressed concern that these younger individuals do not realize that they are being trafficked and they need to be protected a little longer.

REPRESENTATIVE GROH commented on his experience with sophisticated predators, and he relayed the story. He requested a discussion of this.

MS. OVERSTREET pointed out that there is a specific group of abusers, whose children talk and look normal but hide that they have been beaten. She noted that some traffickers are like these abusers, as they know where to hit so it does not show. She spoke about multi-generational abuse. She expressed the understanding that there is a particular relationship between Alaska and Texas, as many people are taken to and from Texas. She continued giving examples of victims being moved around,

expressing the understanding that this would help traffickers from getting caught. She advised that many traffickers have calculated behavior to avoid law enforcement. She continued that youth who are disabled or have a low-level learning disability are often targeted.

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CHAIR VANCE requested advice for those who may be in a vulnerable situation.

MS. OVERSTREET urged individuals to educate themselves and to know what to look for. She suggested studying grooming information to understand what a trafficker might say. She continued that those in this situation should run and find people who would help by hiding them from danger.

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CHAIR VANCE added that there is an incredible amount of shame, and this is what prevents women and boys from speaking up. She continued that it is important for these people to understand that they are not alone. She thanked the presenters.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:56 p.m.