

Texas Office of the Governor – FY 27 County Solutions Human Trafficking

Under “Project Approach & Activities” within the *Narrative* tab of eGrants, applicants must describe how the proposed strategies will improve local investigations and/or prosecutions of sex buyers, traffickers, and other actors benefitting from the commercial sexual exploitation of people.

Under “Supporting Data” within the *Narrative* tab of eGrants, applicants should provide the number of registered sex offenders in their county and provide baseline data on sex trafficking-related arrests and prosecutions for the most recent calendar year available. It is understood that arrest data does not necessarily correspond to prosecution data provided for the same time period. At a minimum, data should pertain to the following offenses:

- Section 20A.02. Trafficking of Persons
- Section 20A.03. Continuous Trafficking of Persons
- Section 43.02. Prostitution
- Section 43.03. Promotion of Prostitution
- Section 43.031. Online Promotion of Prostitution
- Section 43.04. Aggravated Promotion of Prostitution
- Section 43.041. Aggravated Online Promotion of Prostitution
- Section 43.05. Compelling Prostitution
- Section 21.02. Continuous Sexual Abuse of Young Child or Disabled Individual
- Section 21.11. Indecency with a Child
- Section 22.011. Sexual Assault
- Section 22.021. Aggravated Sexual Assault
- Section 43.021. Solicitation of Prostitution
- Section 43.25. Sexual Performance by a Child
- Section 43.251. Employment Harmful to Children
- Section 43.26. Possession or Promotion of Child Pornography

Project Sustainability

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office recently received a US Department of Justice with a multi-year grant award for the Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Human Trafficking Task Force Program. Through the support of the Texas Office of the Governor and the US Department of Justice, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will create a comprehensive task force focused on efforts in Fort Bend County through the addition of a Human Trafficking Task Force Coordinator to increase the capacity of our office to coordinate activities between law enforcement and victim service providers to promote comprehensive investigations and effective, evidence-based prosecution. Currently, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's office has two dedicated human trafficking prosecutors (not grant-funded), an investigator and a criminal data analyst (funded through the Texas Office of the Governor), and a Human Trafficking Task Force Coordinator (financed from the DOJ-ECM Program). Unfortunately, this multi-year grant has multiple funding requirements, with one being a full-time task force coordinator plus required training through the technical assistance provider through the US DOJ. While we recently identified additional federal grant opportunities, recent budget activities through the Office of Budget Management have eliminated them as they are undergoing review to ensure they comply with immigration policy priorities outlined in several Executive Orders issued by the current Presidential administration.

Project Abstract :

Over the last four years, the Texas Office of the Governor supported the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office's efforts to eradicate human trafficking through grant funding to increase capacity with an additional investigator and criminal data analyst dedicated to investigating human trafficking and related offenses. The criminal data analyst plays a crucial role in our investigations, analyzing digital evidence and providing valuable insights that aid in the identification and prosecution of traffickers. Currently, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's office has two dedicated human trafficking prosecutors, an investigator and a criminal data analyst (funded through the Texas Office of the Governor), and a Human Trafficking Task Force Coordinator (funded through the DOJ-ECM Program). This application seeks continued funding for the two previously awarded positions in the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office: a criminal investigative analyst and a criminal investigator assigned to work on investigations involving child and adult exploitation and sex trafficking.

Problem Statement :

Fort Bend County is one of the fastest-growing counties in Texas, with a population of over 822,000 residents (US Census 2020). Due to its proximity to the Texas-Mexico border, the 59 corridor, and the well-known Bissonnet' track' of roadway walked nightly by victims, a notorious area for human trafficking, Fort Bend County is perfectly positioned to see its citizens fall victim to the epidemic of human trafficking. Houston, parts of which are located inside of Fort Bend County, is a well-known hub for human trafficking due to the lack of zoning, international tourism, and ethnic diversity.

A report published by the Human Trafficking Hotline indicates that in 2023, the hotline reported 2,373 tips and identified 583 survivors, resulting in 900 cases and 1,723 victims. Rapid population growth in Fort Bend County in recent years required increasing the number of law enforcement officers, investigators, prosecutors, judges, and available courts to address the increased number of cases and subsequent victims of crime. Recent projections (2023 Population Estimates, Texas Demographic Institute, University of Texas San Antonio) show a 10.8% population increase to 911,893 residents between 2020 and 2024.

Dedicated resources to address human trafficking in Fort Bend County were virtually nonexistent before 2018 as law enforcement and county municipalities refused to acknowledge the issue. Previous efforts to address human trafficking in Fort Bend County began in 2018 when the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office prosecuted six of seven human trafficking cases referred by law enforcement. In January 2019, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office made combating the epidemic of human trafficking a priority and assigned a full-time investigator to the Special Crimes Division for Human Trafficking, which resulted in prosecutors successfully charging 12 out of 15 referred cases in 2019, a 100% increase.

With a 10-year population growth rate of 34%, Fort Bend County is considered one of the nation's top counties with the most significant gains in population nationwide. It boasts a higher-than-state average median household income with less than 8% poverty level, according to the 2023 American Community Survey. Research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research cites, "Individuals with limited economic resources—minors and individuals with limited educational opportunities, work opportunities, or family support—are also at a heightened risk of trafficking (Carpenter and Gates 2016). Traffickers exploit economic vulnerabilities through force, fraud, and coercion, luring victims with promises of work, shelter, food, and support (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime 2008; U.S. Department of Justice 2017). A study by the Polaris Project found that many victims turned to traffickers due to "sustained unemployment, unpaid debt, and desperation to provide for themselves and their children" (Polaris Project 2015a). While wide income disparities are apparent in large urban areas, income disparities are not easily visible in Fort Bend County. Lamar Consolidated Independent School District (LCISD), one of the largest school districts in the county, has over 50% of its campuses designated as Title 1 Schools, with 59% of elementary campuses designated as Title 1 Schools. At least two-thirds of Fort Bend County is unincorporated and has little zoning regulation. In addition, two major Interstate highways run directly through Fort Bend County. Interstate 59 (North-South) connects Laredo, Texas, to Canada, and Interstate 10 (East-West) creates a pipeline from Los Angeles to Jacksonville. As a result of these factors, geography, demographics, and income disparities make Fort Bend County an ideal activity hub for human trafficking.

Recent news on Fox26 in April 2023 (Ziska, n.d.) examined labor trafficking in Fort Bend County. It featured a Katy couple arrested in 2016 and later convicted of luring a woman from their native Nigeria to be a nanny for their children. The victim worked over 20 hours a day without pay and had to sleep on the floor while the couple kept her passport. This case is a glaring example of how easy it can be for traffickers to hide their crimes in plain sight – in this case, the crime took place in Cinco

Ranch, an 8,000-acre planned development community in unincorporated Fort Bend County featuring over 14,000 homes with an average home price of over \$687,000.

Supporting Data :

According to US Census data from 2020, Fort Bend County was one of the nation's top counties with the most significant gains in population nationwide. Rapid population growth in Fort Bend County in recent years requires increasing the number of law enforcement officers, investigators, prosecutors, judges, and available courts to address the increased number of cases and subsequent victims of crime. Recent projections (2023 Population Estimates, Texas Demographic Institute, University of Texas San Antonio) show a 9.2% population increase to 898,514 residents between 2020 and 2023. Recent projections (2023 Population Estimates, Texas Demographic Institute, University of Texas San Antonio) show a 10.8% population increase to 911,893 residents between 2020 and 2024. Expansion of law enforcement agencies and the judicial system has been necessary to maintain a safe environment for our citizens. The population growth has been accompanied by an increase in specific types of cases that require specialized teams of investigators and prosecutors to address - such as Human Trafficking. In April 2020, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office received a grant from the Texas Office of the Governor, Public Safety Division, to support human trafficking investigations and prosecutions. From 2020 through 2022, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office received 894 human trafficking-related cases, including 180 cases of trafficking persons, trafficking children, possession with intent to promote child pornography, promotion of prostitution, sexual performance of a child, smuggling of persons, and compelling prostitution by force. In 2023, Fort Bend County received 353 reports of human-trafficking-related crimes with 157 defendants, including 24 repeat offenders with two or more previous related offenses. Two hundred two cases were filed in 2023 with 190 dispositions, resulting in 160 convictions and/or guilty pleas. The remaining 29 cases were primarily for solicitation of prostitution or prostitution and were dismissed due to the defendants in all of these cases having completed the terms of probation. There was only one acquittal in 2023. In 2024, Fort Bend County received 384 reports of human-trafficking-related crimes with 130 defendants, including 18 repeat offenders with two or more previous related offenses. Two hundred forty-three cases were filed in 2024 with 136 dispositions, resulting in 116 convictions and/or guilty pleas. The remaining 20 cases were primarily for solicitation of prostitution or prostitution and were dismissed due to the defendants in all of these cases having completed the terms of probation. There were zero acquittals in 2024.

Project Approach & Activities:

While Fort Bend County made significant strides to address the problem, there is still much ground to make up. Fort Bend County has 41 cities, ranging from rural towns to larger cities with multiple police departments and municipalities. This requires a coordinated community-wide effort co-led by law enforcement and victim service providers working collaboratively to bring about systemic change in the fight against trafficking in Fort Bend County.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office seeks to continue to address modern-day trafficking by utilizing investigative techniques centered around obtaining modern-day evidence, such as cellular

telephones, social media, and geolocation data, to eradicate networks of traffickers and obtain convictions without relying on victim testimony. We use a team-oriented approach to investigating and prosecuting human trafficking, with collaboration between prosecutors, criminal investigators, and a criminal intelligence analyst. We request funds to continue employing a criminal intelligence analyst who uses open-source and law enforcement databases to gather information on suspects and victims. The criminal investigator and criminal intelligence analyst provide essential surveillance and intelligence to reduce the follow-up time between arresting identified traffickers and identifying other individuals in their network who may be exploiting additional victims.

Criminal intelligence analysts are utilized during proactive operations, where often, the only information that law enforcement has about potential suspects is their online username or phone number. Having criminal intelligence analysts on the scene during these operations can quickly obtain crucial information about suspects before they even arrive on the scene. This gives us an investigatory advantage and helps alleviate safety concerns for undercover officers. We are requesting funds to continue employing a criminal investigator dedicated to investigating human trafficking and related offenses. The investigator reviews information compiled by the criminal intelligence analyst, drafts search warrants, conducts interviews, sets up medical and sexual assault examinations, and sets up forensic interviews of victims at our local Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) and with Texas Forensic Nurse Examiners (TxFNE), set victims up with victim advocates, request grand jury subpoenas and provide testimony in court for bond hearings and trials. The investigator will also follow up on leads that develop from search warrant returns. The investigator will also work undercover to effectuate the rescue of identified victims. The criminal investigator, criminal intelligence analyst, and prosecutors will continuously update one another regarding developments in each case so that tasks can be delegated efficiently and evidence reviewed thoroughly. This team approach will ensure that all investigations are thorough from start to finish, resulting in convictions for traffickers and recovery and justice for victims.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office implements trauma-informed care in its approach to human trafficking investigations, which begins with developing rapport with victims, as many times, victims are unaware they are being trafficked as the "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" of their trafficker. This includes ensuring the safety and well-being of the victim, including privacy concerns the victim may have regardless of their ability or willingness to press charges against their traffickers. During interviews, investigators and prosecutors are trained to ask open-ended questions instead of building a sequenced time line of events as oftentimes victims cannot process events in an orderly sequence, and therefore "bounce between time frames," which is symptomatic of their repeated traumatic experiences. With regards to engaging victim service providers, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office partners with United Against Human Trafficking to form the Fort Bend County Human Trafficking Collective, a project to create a Fort Bend centric Human Trafficking Task Force funded through a multi-year grant from the DOJ Office of Victims of Crime's "Enhanced Collaborative Model for Human Trafficking Task Force" program. We are in year one of this partnership and have hired a task force coordinator to manage the project as a requirement of the grant program. The collective goal will provide a forum to coordinate care and communicate between leadership staff, county agencies, and nonprofit organizations. These partners include the Fort Bend County Sheriff's

Office, Fort Bend County Juvenile Probation, Fort Bend County Behavioral Health Services, the Office of the County Judge, the Fort Bend County Attorney's Office, and nonprofit organizations such as Access Health, the Fort Bend County Women's Center, Catholic Charities, The Landing, Lone Star Legal Aid, Education Works, and Child Advocates of Fort Bend County.

Capacity & Capabilities:

The DA's Office represents the State of Texas in state criminal prosecutions for crimes in Fort Bend County. We have 172 employees consisting of 89 attorneys, 21 investigators, and 62 support staff. The Special Crimes Division of the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office prosecutes Human Trafficking and related offenses. This division consists of a Chief and three felony prosecutors, two of whom handle the Human Trafficking caseload assigned to the Special Crimes Division and managed by two prosecutors—one with full-time Human Trafficking responsibilities and a second with Child Abuse responsibilities. Before receiving our grant award, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office employed one investigator assigned to the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance (HTRA), responsible for all human trafficking-related investigations in Fort Bend County. In 2022, we added a second investigator, supported through other grant funds, to assist with the human trafficking investigations in our county. We also continue to leverage the skills and resources available through our grant-funded analyst to help with the human trafficking investigations. The addition of these positions has increased the number of human trafficking cases and related offenses being investigated and prosecuted in Fort Bend County. The Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance (HTRA) collaborates with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies working with area social service organizations. This membership allows us to partner and share resources with various agencies, including the FBI, Department of Justice, Department of State, and victim resource agencies such as YMCA International, United Against Human Trafficking, and the Landing. With HTRA, we have access to personnel needed to conduct proactive investigations targeted at identifying and rescuing victims of trafficking, as well as identifying and prosecuting sex buyers and pimps. However, this alliance does not provide resources for the time-consuming follow-up investigation required in each case. Our partnership with the other members of HTRA also ensures that victims and potential victims encountered during proactive operations receive a trauma-informed response and subsequent care. Social service organizations are always on scene during these operations to assist victims and potential victims, including arranging medical care and finding housing. Our goal of moving toward technology-based investigations also ensures that victims can continue focusing on their recovery needs rather than the stress, worry, and fear accompanying the wait and preparation for eventual prosecution.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office is also a member of the Houston Metro Internet Crimes Against Children (HMICAC) Task Force, a network of state and federal law enforcement agencies in the Southern District of Texas that are involved in proactive and reactive investigations and prosecutions of persons involved in child abuse and exploitation involving the Internet. Our strong ties with the Houston Metro ICAC Task Force have allowed for collaboration in cases where child victims are exploited on the Internet as part of the commission of a Human Trafficking offense. The

Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office is also a member of the Coalition in the Fight Against Human Trafficking and creator of a new Fort Bend County Human Trafficking Collective Task Force supported by a multi-year federal grant which connects and empowers service providers, law enforcement agencies, and stakeholders to prevent, detect, and dismantle human trafficking in Fort Bend County. The new task force will provide a forum to coordinate care and communicate between leadership staff among other county agencies, including Fort Bend County Juvenile Probation, Behavioral Health Services, the Office of the County Judge, the Fort Bend County Attorney's Office, as well as other interested parties including Access Health, The George Foundation, and Child Advocates of Fort Bend. These collaborative efforts will increase case filings, resulting in an accelerated need for prosecutorial support in the county.

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Unfortunately, this multi-year grant has multiple funding requirements, with one being a full-time task force coordinator plus required training through the technical assistance provider through the US DOJ. While we recently identified additional federal grant opportunities, recent budget activities through the Office of Budget Management have eliminated them as they are undergoing review to ensure they comply with immigration policy priorities outlined in several Executive Orders issued by the current Presidential administration.

Performance Management :

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office utilizes a comprehensive strategy focused on evidence-based prosecution by leveraging surveillance, intelligence gathering, and data mining technology. This approach allows them to collect essential evidence that supports the prosecution of traffickers without solely depending on victim-witness testimony, which can often be fraught with challenges due to the victims' reluctance or fear. This methodology not only enhances the ability to secure convictions but also aims to disrupt trafficking networks more effectively. In 2023, the office hosted five undercover operations that helped rescue 32 victims and arrest 74 sex buyers and sex traffickers for solicitation of prostitution and other human trafficking-related offenses. The success of our program has been recognized through the US Department of Justice with a multi-year grant award for the Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Human Trafficking Task Force Program. Through the support of the Texas Office of the Governor and the US Department of Justice, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will create a comprehensive task force focused on efforts in Fort Bend County through the addition of a Human Trafficking Task Force Coordinator to increase the capacity of our office to coordinate activities between law enforcement and victim service providers to promote comprehensive investigations and effective, evidence-based prosecution. Currently, the Fort

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Target Group :

We expect to identify and rescue victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in Fort Bend County (and those who have a nexus to Fort Bend County) and seek to provide them with referrals necessary to facilitate their recovery as healthy and productive citizens. We also expect to identify perpetrators who engage in human trafficking and related offenses to hold them accountable for their crimes through aggressive prosecution.

Evidence-Based Practices:

In a 2015 study conducted by Thorn, in collaboration with Texas Christian University, 260 survivors of domestic minor sex trafficking provided information on recruiting practices, experiences in life, technology use, advertising, interactions with buyers, and prosecution. When asked about the role technology played in trafficking, 63% reported communicating online with their trafficker, 57% reported that their trafficker purchased a cellular telephone for them to use, and 75% reported their trafficker used social media and "apps" regularly. The Thorn study found that, as of 2015, the most common sites accessed by traffickers were Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tagged, MeetMe, MocoSpace, and Twitter. Additionally, the Thorn survey found that online advertising was increasing alarmingly: only 38% of those trafficked before 2004 were advertised online, compared to 75% post-2004. In 2018, the Ohio Attorney General's Human Trafficking Commission commissioned a study into how social media is used to contact, recruit, and sell children for sex. The study, which was conducted by the University of Toledo Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute, found that social media not only allows a trafficker to have access to multiple vulnerable potential victims at once but also allows a trafficker to mask traditional clues that they are a potentially dangerous individual. The research confirms what we observed in our investigations in 2019-2022 – that social media and cellular telephones are essential tools of the trade in the trafficking world. Having a sufficient number of dedicated personnel trained to locate social media sites, draft search warrants, and review information and evidence obtained from social media search warrant returns and cellular telephone forensics is imperative to obtaining and intelligently evaluating information that will not only lead to successful prosecutions but may lead to the identification of additional suspects and identification and rescue of further victims. References: Bouche, Vanessa, The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, Texas Christian University, January 2018; Miller, Dan, Study Details Link Between Social Media and Sex Trafficking, Forensic Magazine: Rockaway, October 8, 2018.