HOMELAND SECURITY EXPERTS GROUP (HSEG)

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PLENARY SESSION 4:

PARTNERSHIPS IN COUNTER-HUMAN TRAFFICKING EFFORTS

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Plenary Session 4 - Partnerships in Counter-Human Trafficking Efforts

MR. ROB: We're going to turn to one of the stains on society worldwide. And to introduce this panel is Rob Clark.

MR. CLARK: Thank you very much. I appreciate that, Rob. So, my name is Rob Clark. I am the senior federal account executive at Instabase, covering Department of Homeland Security. And I'm not prone to exaggeration or hyperbole, but this is the single greatest moment of my life, right now in front of you, to introduce this panel.

So, what is Instabase, you may ask, and you may not ask, but I'll tell you quickly. So, Instabase is the intelligent document platform for unstructured data, processing data. So, across the homeland, reserve, anything that's paper-based, anything that could create a bottleneck, anything we're using manual manipulation of documents, there is no need to languish, Instabase can help, and I look forward to have in the conversations here.

So, we like to joke around a lot, of course, but we take our mission at Instabase with the Department of Homeland Security very seriously. And speaking of serious, our next plenary session, Session 4 - Partnerships in Counter-Human Trafficking Efforts.

Human trafficking is a $150 billion annual stain on modern society and an issue that affects all nations and communities. Governments alone cannot address the issue, and increasingly rely on partnerships with civil society to scale training and solution efforts. How can we all contribute to ending this modern-day slavery? Well, there's no one better to help us answer that question. Our moderator, HSEG member, the president of Shore Road Multimedia, ladies and gentlemen, I leave this discussion to our esteemed moderator, Ms. Jeanne Meserve. Thank you, Jeanne.

MS. MESERVE: Thanks, Rob. First off, I have to apologize for my Lauren Bacall voice. I wish I could blame it on whiskey and cigarettes, but not the case, alas.

We've been talking a lot at this conference about the big issues, the big impacts, the big implications. And I think we sometimes forget that at its heart, this is about people and nothing illustrates that more than human trafficking. Millions and millions of people around the world are trafficked, coerced into labor and commercial sex. We're going to discuss today how to get handle on this problem and potentially how to prevent it.

I have an esteemed panel, let me introduce all of them to you. First, next to me is Steve Francis. He is the Acting Associate Director of Homeland Security Investigations at DHS. Thanks so much. Next to him, Kevin Davis. He is chief of police in Fairfax County. And beyond him, at the end is Catherine Chen, who is CEO of the Polaris Project, which is an NGO working to combat and fight sex and labor trafficking in North America. Thank you all for being here today.

I want to start off with the poll. I asked what should be the priority for law enforcement. And these were the responses we got. The numbers are changing as we look at the screen here. Drug trafficking, a clear winner at 50 percent cybercrime, and firearms -- oops, we're changing a little bit. Human trafficking has moved up, it's because you're in this session, you will start voting this way, I know, I know.

UNINDENTIFIED SPEAKER: That would be awkward.

MS. MESERVE: It's fascinating to watch the variation. Probably, every vote is changing this. Okay. But drug trafficking is the clear winner here. Chief, give us a reality check. For you, as the person on the ground, dealing with this issue, when you are prioritizing the things you have to deal with, where does human smuggling fall, human trafficking, excuse me?

MR. DAVIS: So, Jeanne, and good morning, everyone. I hate to be the contrarian. It's top 10. It's not top 5, in Fairfax County and those familiar, about 40 minutes away, surrounds the western side of Washington, D.C. Of those crimes listed on the pole, firearms trafficking and more specifically, the illegal possession of firearms by people who are prohibited from possessing them and they commit crimes with them. So, a lot of these crimes are connected to one another, where there's drugs, there's money and where there's money, there's guns.

But in -- I've served as a police chief since 2013 and I've told aspiring police chiefs, from time to time that, if you ever want to attract more media to your news conference, get one of your PIOs to leak that there's a human trafficking element associated with your announcement, and they'll all come in droves. It is an issue.

In Fairfax County, it's more body houses and prostitution than domestic servitude, but it does exist. But my concern as a local police chief and the nation's 32nd largest police department right now, is murders committed by family members, the illegal possession of firearms, commercial robberies, youth crime, youth violence, and violent repeat offenders. Human trafficking is absolutely something we're committed to, but it's not, it's not top 5.

MS. MESERVE: But when it comes to the allocation of personnel and resources, I presume human trafficking is going to get less than these --

MR. DAVIS: They get less. We have six full time detectives assigned to our missing and exploited unit. We have one human trafficking analysts, which I would say is probably more than most police departments in America. And we have one detective that's assigned full-time to human trafficking. So, you know, of 1,500 cops, having about seven focused full time on human trafficking, specifically and issues that surround it, it's a commitment. Even though it's small, it's probably more than most police departments.

MS. MESERVE: How about HSI, what kind of priority is that for you? You have a range of issues to deal with.

MR. DAVIS: Yes. So, I mean, we're very large, right? So, we have almost 10,000 employees, 6,800 special agents, we're the principal investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. I would say we're ranks definitely, you know, every year it's national security and then public safety, and it falls under the public safety realm. Just this past fiscal year, I think we've issued over 1,100 human trafficking investigations. We've supported or rescued over 700 victims. And then, 2 years ago, the Department of Homeland Security created the center on countering human trafficking, where it's led by Homeland Security Investigation, one of our assistant directors. So, we created an entire division.

In every one of our field offices, there is a group or a unit that has like, a led by a supervisor over human trafficking. And of course, the international and global reach that we have are located in 53 countries physically and over 9 -- representing 90 countries. So, we have an opportunity and also our Transnational Criminal Investigative Units overseas that support our human trafficking efforts.

MS. MESERVE: So, Catherine, when you hear this, is this discouraging you as someone who's deeply engaged in the issue?

MS. CHEN: It's actually not, and I know, Chief Davis is looking for a little pizzazz here. But, I mean, I think that the reality and even just thinking about the title of this panel, right? We're talking about partnerships in order to combat trafficking, it's not going to be a single entity that can unilaterally solve this problem.

And the truth is, that what we've seen over the last decade is that trafficking has increased from 12 million people around the world in 2012 to 28 million people around the world in 2022.

MS. MESERVE: Why such an increase, Catherine?

MS. CHEN: I mean, I think it's a lot of different things, right? We're seeing of course, increased migrant flows, climate refugees, people who are being pushed out of their homes and there are -- and sort of the protective environments they are in because of wars, we are seeing an increased drive to find the cheapest supply chain possible. And I think we're seeing an increase in sophistication around the ability to detect and the ability to understand kind of where trafficking is showing up.

MS. MESERVE: Steve, just this morning, I saw a news story about a trafficking ring that had been broken up in Florida. And the eight women involved were all from Cuba. We know there's increased migration from Cuba, but I'm wondering what sort of geographical trends you're seeing. Are you seeing more people from Haiti, from Cuba, from Venezuela, from Ukraine, where so many people left the country?

MR. FRANCIS: So, we know -- well, number one, we don't have strong presence in those countries, but we definitely have, you know, relationships that we're developing. But in those --

MS. MESERVE: In terms of the trafficking, you're seeing in the U.S. though --

MR. FRANCIS: In the U.S.

MS. MESERVE: -- are you seeing more of those nationalities involved?

MR. FRANCIS: We're not. And I think what we've seen is obviously, you know, the human smuggling networks, it's completely different from human trafficking. But what's happened is, you know, as those vulnerable populations enter into the United States, there is a more, you know, opportunity for those individuals to be trafficked into forced labor, into sex trafficking.

According to, you know, State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, right? We're looking at Mexico and Honduras is the top 2 countries that actually have the most victims here in the United States as it relates to human trafficking.

MS. MESERVE: Chief, at the local level, are you seeing an interplay between COVID, economic stresses, opioids, and human trafficking?

MR. DAVIS: That's a great question. We're seeing a huge part of our murders, probably a third plus the last 2 or 3 years associated with adult children living at home with their aging parents and boom happens and they kill their parents.

So, you know, I think history will one day look back on the impact of COVID, on violence, and I think it'll be inside the home. But I do want to say that, you know, the human trafficking tips that we get, and I checked the numbers before I came, we received 23 from Polaris just this year and that surpasses the year end totals of the last couple calendar years.

So, we do take it very seriously. I think the assumption is, particularly in a place like Fairfax County, it's big, it's relatively wealthy, I think the assumption is that there's a lot more human trafficking occurring, particularly with domestic servitude, restaurants, we're not seeing in droves. Most of the human trafficking as I mentioned earlier, are the body houses and one of my detectives, who I think was maybe 30 years old, told me that we're seeing traditional prostitution. And I said, "What's traditional prostitution?" He said, "Well, you know, online prostitution." And I think, to most people in this room, that's probably not traditional prostitution, you know, I've heard that.

But it's just so -- it's gone from, you know, being online to being aware of body houses, because we do a lot of work to catch people on their way to these places. And then, the prosecutorial appetite for that crime of prostitution, which undoubtedly, has a connection to human trafficking, it doesn't exist at the local level the way it used to.

MS. MESERVE: I want to get back to technology in a moment. But Catherine, before I do, could you weigh in on this question of the economic stresses, the pandemic stresses --

MS. CHEN: Yes.

MS. MESERVE: -- and how they're impacting the numbers, the frequency of this?

MS. CHEN: Yes. Well, and maybe just to give everyone a little bit of context, right? Polaris operates the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline. So, for those of you who live along the I-95 corridor and you stop at a truck stop or a rest stop, or the phone number on the back of the bathroom doors, for those of you who are flying through most major airports, where the bath -- where the phone number on the back of the bathroom door.

And over the last 15 years, we've addressed 80,000 situations of sex and labor trafficking and have connected more than 35,000 victims and survivors to services or gotten them directly out of their situation by connecting them to law enforcement.

And so, the picture that we tend to have is a pretty robust data-driven picture. It's not prevalence. It's not, you know, generalizable, because it's really people who are calling in to the hotline and who know that the hotline exists. But it is a pretty significant number and I think what we've seen in the immediate aftermath of COVID is quite telling. I think the entire country understands that there's an economic challenge that we're all facing right now, but during the first 6 months following the COVID pandemic, we saw a 40 percent increase in the number of emergency calls that were coming in, people were desperate for home -- for housing. Even people who are trapped in sex trafficking situations, a lot of times they had traffickers who were kicking them out of the places that the traffickers were keeping them. And then they were needing homes and housing, right? And so, there was -- there's a lot of different complexities that were going on there around the economic need.

What we're seeing now is that, you know, 2 years later, people who have survived trafficking, people who we all think of as having helped and assisted and gotten back onto a road of recovery, which I think animates all of us in terms of the work that we do, are slipping back into situations where they are back in relationships that are predatory, they might be back in exploitative jobs, because the chance to be able to truly break-free when the economy is what it is, I think it's become very, very challenging for people.

MR. FRANCIS: Jeanne, if I may also, I mean, we are seeing this intersection between opioids and sex trafficking, most -- and a lot of our investigations are results start showing that traffickers are really, you know, exploiting, you know, individuals that are addicted to narcotics. We're also seeing, you know, parents, caregivers that are exploiting children that are addicted to drugs.

So, we're seeing this kind of evolution at well. And really it's post-pandemic and the opioid crisis, that's really creating these traffickers that are focused on the vulnerable populations, especially the ones that are addicted to drugs.

MS. MESERVE: Are you also seeing traffickers using the internet --

MR. FRANCIS: Yes, hell yes.

MS. MESERVE: -- to recruit? Talk about that.

MR. FRANCIS: Absolutely. So, internet, social media, platforms, we're seeing the dating apps, we're seeing gaming where the traffickers are, you know, either giving some sort of coerced way in identifying someone and establishing a relationship and then attempting to move them into kind of a trafficking environment. We're doing a lot of undercover activity, both covertly on the dark web and it's through our undercover platforms and we're seeing this kind of, you know, internet based, you know, traffickers that are on there, that are really exploiting people for both sex and labor.

The good news is, right, with some of our efforts proactive and awareness campaigns that were, you know, really out there in the cyberspace doing a lot of iGuardian and other presentations to, you know, communities that are telling us and telling them where to kind of focus and report these activities.

MS. MESERVE: So, a lot of it's happening on encrypted apps, I imagine, which make investigations tough.

MR. FRANCIS: Extremely.

MS. MESERVE: And when it comes to money, is a lot of it crypto? And is that a blessing or is that a curse?

MR. FRANCIS: I think its payment-to-payment transactions that are happening. On the crypto space, we -- I mean, we've dabbled in it and saw a little bit of it, but primarily, it's just the payment-to-payment activity that we're seeing. I don't know if you want to -- yeah.

MS. MESERVE: Catherine, did you want to chime in it?

MS. CHEN: Yes, I just want to add a little bit to that. You know, one of the things that we saw in the data from 2020 was a 125 percent increase in recruitment of sex trafficking victims on Facebook. 99 percent increase on Instagram. And so, you know, what we really saw was a shift from traffickers going after vulnerable people in strip clubs, in youth homes, in schools, because those institutions were not gathering and shifting to online. And that's probably not surprising, right? We've seen everybody shifts online and so, traffickers are doing the same.

MS. MESERVE: Are the platforms doing anything about it?

MS. CHEN: They are, but I think that everybody agrees that they need to do more. Right? And I would also just add that, you know, I think one of the other things that we've seen is, I love this poll that you started with Jeanne, because the way we look at things, it's all integrated. Right? Drug traffickers and human traffickers often are the same people. And increasingly, what we're seeing is an intersection between cybercrime and trafficking. Right?

So, a great case actually, that just came out, that folks should get a chance to read about. It came out of Cambodia and it was essentially the crackdown of cyber scamming operations that were being operated by the Chinese mafia in Cambodia. They were trafficking Mandarin-speaking youth from across Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Singapore in order to force them to do cyber scamming, in order to be able to build relationships with people on their, you know, buy text and steal money. Right?

So, it's -- I think we're getting to a place where there's a real confluence of some of the things that we see in the national security space.

MR. DAVIS: I'd say the grooming, the recruiting on social media, I named one of those social media platforms during a press conference a few months ago and got myself in a little bit of trouble. There's Anthony Eugene Robinson has been dubbed the shopping cart killer for those around the area. I see some head nods. He's murdered two in Harrisonburg, Virginia, two in Fairfax County, one in D.C., many, many more that we just have not uncovered. And he would go after vulnerable victims, all folks of, you know, none from the immigrant community, but vulnerable. They're drug addicted, they're -- two of the three that I'm familiar with were listed as missing persons, non-critical missing persons.

So, we really pay attention to our missing person cases. Particularly the young adults that are drug addicted, you know, have issues with family members, et cetera, because they're very vulnerable. And they're -- you're right, they're not being found in the places pre-COVID, that we would suspect, we're used to finding that, but there -- it's all online. And we have detectives that have spent day and night online trying to identify these folks.

MS. CHEN: Uh-huh.

MS. MESERVE: So, sex trafficking has become a narrative in the QAnon movement. Those of us who live in D.C. are all aware of the "Comet pizza" case, just as an example. What kind of impact, if any, is that having on this situation? Catherine, you want to take this?

MS. CHEN: Sure. As you know one of the things that I think is quite challenging for us in this moment in time, is the confluence between disinformation and the issue of human trafficking.

Trafficking is a uniquely animating narrative for people who are interested in both violent extremism as well as in who are susceptible to conspiracy theories. Our best thinking is that, it's because it is the deepest fear that somebody can have, which is somebody harming your child, mixed with this idea of criminal syndicates or cobols (phonetic), or secret or organized crime, mixed with a very growing and loud distrust of institutions and government, right?

And so, what we're starting to see is, big themes of politicians being traffickers, big themes of law enforcement resources being moved from fighting trafficking to now investigating January 6th, for example, right? And these are things that I think, you know, knowing that yesterday you all had a good panel on DVE. I think these are the kinds of things that we certainly see.

The National Human Trafficking hotline was the target of QAnon back in 2018. And so, we experienced a DDoS attack and we were able to push back and able to get the hotline back up and running. And we're very proud that in 15 years, we've never really let the phone drop. But I think one of the biggest things that we've seen is trafficking being such a compelling narrative and just sort of loosely based on reality sometimes, right, a lot of the narratives that are out there are so close to skirting the truth, it's really hard for people to understand what is and isn't true.

And ultimately, what we saw was, you know, the summer before the 2020 election, there was a big disinformation campaign that ended up being also animated by foreign influence, around Wayfair, the furniture maker Wayfair. And this idea that children were being trafficked if you bought a very expensive cabinet, a child would be brought to your home, right? It resulted in more than 400 calls into the hotline. What that could have done was assist 63 additional victims and survivors. And when you think about the fact that in any given year, there are only about 400 or 500 federal cases that go forward, is a huge impact on the reality of what we all need to be doing and it's not only in the trafficking space, we've also seen QAnon do the same thing to LGBTQ hotlines. We've seen them do it to any sort of victim service hotline at this point in time.

And then, the last thing I'll say is, you know, I think a lot of the time we see people looking at kind of the conversation about human trafficking and really wondering if -- it's like, is that as real as it seems, right? But I -- where we're sitting is, there's a very real and profound impact on the areas of domestic violent extremism, the areas of national security when you're talking about using trafficking as an animating narrative.

So, the two women who died on January 6th, Rosanne Boylan and Ashli Babbitt, they were both animated in less than a year by anti-trafficking narratives. That were false, right? And so, there is I think a very real-world national security element to this that goes beyond the criminal syndicates that are traffickers.

MS. MESERVE: Let's talk about cooperation for a little bit. Steve, you said it HSI. I've read that 20 federal agencies are involved in fighting trafficking. Is that too many?

MR. FRANCIS: No. You know, I do think, you know, we're very proud of what DHS has done with the center, the CCHT, really enabling and embracing and collaboration, which includes, you know, 16 different agencies that sit there, private partnership now, which signed our first MOU with Liberty shared. I also know that our state and local partners bring tremendous value to what we do each and every day. We have water enforcement security task forces, we cross-designate our authorities to our state and local partners.

MS. MESERVE: But what about within the federal government? Are things stove piped in silo or is there a true sharing of information?

MR. FRANCIS: So, I mean, I'll talk about within HSI I think, you know, we have been siloed, right? I think with these crimes now, you have to really look at it from a cyber financial human trafficking, private partnership, when you approach any sort of these investigations. We work extremely close with the FBI. I would say probably right in this effort on human trafficking, you know, HSI and FBI are kind of leading these efforts federally. Maybe there are some others out there, but I think there's a lot of cooperation that's happening within the government.

Are there too many? I think the CCHT is kind of the model to kind of bring together the federal agencies with alongside our state and local partner.

MS. MESERVE: There are two things I'm wondering that might make the sharing of information difficult. One, Information is power. Does some agencies hoard the information? Two, is there so much interest in pursuing prosecutions and protecting evidence for prosecutions, that you're not getting some of the nitty-gritty information that might be helpful to disrupting trafficking?

MR. FRANCIS: You know, I'm not so sure. I mean, I think as we have evolved, right, over the past few decades I mean, every single human trafficking investigation that's conducted and I would say across the federal government, has been from a victim centric approach. And with that, we're also, you know, kind of leveraging all of our partners in whoever's there available to assist us. I think the information flow is happening. There's doing a lot of announcements from the Department of Justice on the kind of the federal level on human trafficking prosecutions. A lot of efforts, you know, I mean localized first, all the way up to the federal government. I think it's getting better over time. So, are we missing --

MS. MESERVE: But still room for improvement?

MR. FRANCIS: Of course, yes.

MS. MESERVE: Yes.

MR. FRANCIS: I think there's always room for improvement. And I think, you know, we're doing a pretty good job here in the United States.

MS. MESERVE: So Chief, I'd love to get your perspective on what you're getting from the federal government, is it what you need and are you getting enough of it?

MR. DAVIS: So, it all depends on frankly which federal agency you're talking about. So, HSI --

MS. MESERVE: HSI is perfect.

MR. DAVIS: -- is great. No, that's as good as new. HSI is great. But, you know, and here's another political reality, especially for me, and hopefully this isn't televised. In Fairfax County, there's a big advocacy community that would cringe at the very notion that I'm even sitting up here, because of their stance on any and everything that they think has to do with immigration advocacy. We have a trust policy in Fairfax County with an escape clause to it that we use on a daily basis. And if we didn't use the escape clause on a daily basis, we wouldn't be able to interact with federal law enforcement.

MS. MESERVE: Explain what that is, an escape clause?

MR. DAVIS: It's a policy that precludes local law enforcement from considering the immigration status of people we encounter and arrest. And we've never considered the immigration status of people we encounter or arrest, only in the event that that person is criminally wanted on a charge. That's it. We don't check the civil status of people we come into contact with. But there's a notion out there that we do.

So, I'll say, the more we get away from 9/11 and I think we were talking earlier Jeanne, I was a young lieutenant in Prince George's County, Maryland when 9/11 hit, but there are people who have no muscle memory of the lessons that 9/11 has taught us. But I'll say this for HSI and ATF and DEA in particular, those partnerships are stronger than ever. Sometimes because of, you know, the catchphrase of, you know, the integrity of the investigation, the integrity of the prosecution, and I get all those things and all those things are very, very real.

But the biggest gap I see is not between the local cops and federal law enforcement and -- or local cops in the U.S. Attorney's offices, the gap that I see is between the U.S. Attorney's offices and the local prosecutors. There's a huge gap. They communicate through us and when we communicate --

MS. MESERVE: What accounts for that?

MR. DAVIS: Just the nature of their jobs, prosecuting local and state crimes versus federal prosecutions. What they tend to do is communicate through us. I mean, we'd like to take as many cases that we can, federal, because there's more certainty of a consequence. Sometimes there's a little tug and pull between local prosecutors who are elected and federal prosecutors. And I think the answer is not to have me as a police chief broker that relationship, but to have them form a more -- form a partnership to begin with, to strengthen that relationship.

MS. MESERVE: So, Catherine, the immigration status question. Of course, many Americans are trafficked, let me say that. Not everybody is someone who has come into the country from another country. But does immigration status become a real tough issue for you to deal with because some people are reluctant, even if they're in a trafficking situation to report it?

MS. CHEN: Absolutely.

MS. MESERVE: Because they're afraid they're going to get kicked out?

MS. CHEN: Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think one of the things we see most often, you know what, we track, what's the method of force fraud or coercion that a victim was held with. Right? Not only what were they exploited for, but how were they held. And threats of immigration enforcement are the number one. It's not chains, it's not locked rooms, it's not any of that. It is the threat of deportation and I think in particular, when stories and policies existed in the previous administration that made deportation, the detention center setting, as terrible as it was. And it's not to say that, it's so much better now. But it was a major driver of people not wanting to report their trafficking situation, because they were willing to stay in a trafficking situation more than end up in a detention center. And that really says something about, you know, the state of what allows for someone to end up as intimidated as they are. Right?

The creation of the trafficking law in the United States in 2000, created the idea of immigration relief, if you were willing to cooperate with law enforcement on your investigation. It's called a T-visa. And we have seen a real backlog in the number of T-visas that are actually being granted. And so, I think that that's one of the policy things that the Polaris is pushing for. But yes, I think that without figuring out a way to build stronger trust and I think that trust is essential through local law enforcement, it's always going to be hard to be able to connect to immigrant victims.

MS. MESERVE: You mentioned I believe Steve, that, you know, you get information from Polaris referral, so clearly there's an NGO government interface. I'm wondering how the private sector fits into this. I remember that there was an initiative, I think with truckers, to try and educate them about this and urge them to report. But I recently caught a story about a hotel chain being sued because somebody said they were complicit in trafficking.

What's your view of the relationship with the private sector, whether it's productive or not, and how you can make it more productive?

MR. FRANCIS: Yeah, I think it's, you know, I mean, there are some national projects, but individually in our offices located throughout the United States, there's a lot of efforts to do outreach at the hotels and the transportation industry, trucking industry. There was a national program that is for the truckers. I know the CCHT is looking at this from, you know, how can we leverage more of the private sector in helping us getting the word out. There's a lot of efforts out there with, you know, delivery drivers at airports, TSA.

So, there's a lot of agencies that are also supporting on, you know, here are the indicators, here's where to report human trafficking. And of course, Polaris, I think a couple 100 come in every year to -- well, a lot more, but within HSI that we take a look at.

MS. MESERVE: Chief, are those kinds of efforts effective, do you think?

MR. DAVIS: Well, even in Fairfax County, a pretty sophisticated and wealthy jurisdiction, we still have hotels, motels that rent by the hour. And you know, I've mentioned earlier Anthony Eugene Robinson, our shopping cart killer, we have video footage of him and his behavior in and around this particular motel in Alexandria, that any employee that's half awake would have determined to be suspicious and it should have resulted in connection with the police department.

So, I don't know if we have to incentivize it, I don't know that we have to mandate it by local -- better local laws, but there are still some gaps between business corporate responsibility at the hotel, motel level, not just the small ones, not just the small ones. Tyson's is a mecca, it's the 50 yard line of Fairfax County and it's a huge generator of our tax base, but there are absolutely some human trafficking challenges that occur there as well.

MS. MESERVE: Catherine, I just want to touch on international cooperation before we start taking some questions from the audience. From your perspective, how important is it to have international cooperation? And then, I'd love to have you Steve, talk about how robust it is.

MS. CHEN: I mean, I think it's essential. You know, a really good example of this is that, Polaris does a lot of work with the Mexican consular network. So, we've trained 25 -- over 2,500 consular officials in the last couple of years. And what we're doing with them is, making sure that they understand U.S. laws, so that when Mexican citizens go to consulates and have a problem with an employer or have a problem with the relationship, or whatever else it is that's going on, consulates are aware of the laws and can report things. Right?

Most trafficking, well, I think it really depends, right? Like, the way -- and I want to be really clear, I think this room knows this, but there's a difference between smuggling and trafficking, right? And what we're talking about with trafficking is the end state of exploitation for commercial sex or for labor, and that you've gotten there through force fraud and coercion. Right? And so, it's not just that -- it's not just people coming from overseas and coming to the United States, largely that is smuggling or migration, right?

One last thing I was just going to say on this, I think the corporate piece really has a large footprint. Right? The way we talk about partnerships with corporations is most often around what aspect of your business is proximate to a trafficking situation. So, a great example that Chief Davis gave, which is like, if your front desk clerk of a motel does not understand what trafficking looks like or does not understand what other suspicious business looks like, that's a problem.

And then, at the same time, if you are, you know, a Malaysian glove factory and you are producing your goods with forced labor, DHS has an amazing tool at its disposal, which is prohibiting goods that have been made with forced labor from entering the U.S. at all. Right? And so, I think that there's a vast surface area for us to be thinking about in terms of how corporations and government intersect.

MS. MESERVE: Steve, quickly, international cooperation.

MR. FRANCIS: Yes. So, 14 designated transnational criminal investigative units that are trained by HSI in 14 different countries. We're seeing a lot of this in kind of the fruits of this, in Guatemala with human smuggling operations, where identify transnational organizations, and working joint investigations on title intercepts in the United States and in Guatemala. And that's a TCI unit, one example of how impactful they are. And then, that's subsequent to the Department of Justice announcement of JTF Alpha, which is focused on DOJ and DHS's efforts on combating human smuggling and trafficking.

But I think what we'll see and what we're seeing currently with TCO's is the human smuggling efforts in the routes and really the convergence of crimes and moving through those routes into the United States. And then hopefully, we'll identify the traffickers as well through that kind of network and their cooperation with TCIs.

MS. MESERVE: Very quick, yes or no question. Will tightening the border make any difference when it comes to human trafficking?

MS. CHEN: No.

MS. MESERVE: No. Quick, no?

MR. FRANCIS: I don't think so.

MR. DAVIS: Me neither.

MS. MESERVE: No. Okay. Questions, who out there has one for us? Am I seeing no hands? It's such a great topic, do you have one here? Oh, wait for a microphone, right up here in the front.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Just a quick question. Thank you for both -- all very much for the session. How often do drug traffickers wind up in jail here? What's the downside for them?

MS. MESERVE: Steve, do you have any response on that one? I'm not -- there is a nexus, as has been described between the drug trafficking and the human trafficking. But I don't know if any of us would have those numbers at hand.

MR. FRANCIS: Yes, I don't have the numbers at hand. We have a number of detectives that are assigned to DEA task forces. And someone mentioned earlier about opioids and fentanyl, that's a huge, huge problem across this country. So, we are seeing for the first-time federal prosecution of drug dealers who are not on the scene of a fatal overdose, but we can prove that they distributed that fatal dose. So, that's encouraging, at least in Northern Virginia.

MS. MESERVE: Any other trafficking questions out there? Did you have a follow up?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Follow up, how about human traffickers? Those (inaudible) wind up in jail. How about human trafficking?

MS. MESERVE: How many prosecution -- successful prosecutions are there?

MR. FRANCIS: I'll have to --

MS. MESERVE: Is it still a rare thing?

MS. CHEN: I think it's still a rare thing.

MR. FRANCIS: Yes.

MS. CHEN: Yes. Steve, go ahead.

MR. FRANCIS: I think -- I mean, there's a lot of effort that's put into it, but meeting the prosecutorial thresholds of human trafficking, R. Kelly is one good example of a human trafficker despite, you know, I think what we saw at that trial and really, I mean, it's a, you know, 20, 30 year old case, but using the power and influence of, you know, someone like him, he was recently convicted. And these are big deterrence, right? Big names of individuals that use their power and influence to traffic, not only minors, he was actually charged and convicted of forced labor, coercion, so you name it. I mean, he probably was convicted of everything related to human trafficking.

MR. DAVIS: I'd say that the human traffickers, at least in my experience, and for large jurisdictions tend to get Al Capone for something else.

MS. MESERVE: Yes.

MR. DAVIS: Right. They start up here, but the threshold is really difficult. So, they get Al Capone for something else.

MS. CHEN: Yes, I was going to say the same thing, I think, I look at it as actually a reflection of law enforcement growing sophistication, that you don't have to only go after human trafficking charge, you can go money laundering, you can go, you know, RICO, you can go a lot of different ways in order to try and get somebody.

MS. MESERVE: I want to ask one concluding question for the three of you. If there was one thing that could be done, one action that could be taken that you think would have a significant impact on this issue, what would it be?

MR. FRANCIS: So, I'm biased, codifying the CCHT into law and there's a bill that's sitting with Congress too, the Human Trafficking Act of 2021.

MS. MESERVE: And what would that result in?

MR. FRANCIS: More resources, funding, you know, kind of the evolution of the CCHT and there's a lot of work that needs to be done there.

MS. MESERVE: Chief?

MR. DAVIS: Really quick, HSI and U.S. Attorney's offices across the country having or making rather a concerted effort to better educate local prosecutors and state legislatures.

MS. MESERVE: Why legislatures?

MR. DAVIS: They don't understand and they can -- they --

MS. MESERVE: That's seems pretty basic, right?

MR. DAVIS: So, there's such a gap between Federal Legislation and Local Legislation --

MS. MESERVE: Uh-huh.

MR. DAVIS: -- and I think, if there's not greater awareness at the local level, particularly with State Senators and State Delegates, about the importance of, you know, some of them will say, "Well, let the Feds handle that." Well, the threshold is so high sometimes and the threshold does not exist on a state level, there's got to be a way to kind of bring the two closer together.

MS. MESERVE: Leveling up.

MS. CHEN: Before I answer you, can I just give a little bit of an example there, of what Chief Davis is saying. One of the things that we see is, 14 states around the country still arrest child trafficking victims as criminal.

MS. MESERVE: The victims?

MR. DAVIS: Yes.

MS. CHEN: Victims, right. So, the federal law says you're a crime victim, you have crime victim rights, you get services, you get assistance. 14 states still arrest children. And so, that gap, I think is a huge thing, that both traffickers can take advantage of.

MR. DAVIS: Not Virginia for the record.

MS. MESERVE: Not Virginia. Well, actually, yes, Virginia, but we're talking --

MR. DAVIS: Not me, what are you talking about.

MS. CHEN: Not your state legislature, not yours. I'd say prevention. We actually need to start talking about what makes people vulnerable. And change -- systematically change the things that make them vulnerable.

MS. MESERVE: And those things are, housing --

MS. CHEN: Housing, particularly for LGBTQ youth, right? Opioid addiction, inter-family substance use, these are major drivers of who ends up vulnerable to trafficking. And then two kind of wonkier ones, we have our sights set on the temporary guest worker system in the United States, the H-2, because the vast majority of labor trafficking victims that we learn about are actually coming into the country, legally on an H-2 visa, but the H-2 visa does not allow you to quit your job without losing your immigration status, which gives a lot of employers, a lot of incentive to not pay their workers.

And then, the last one is, stopping the arrest of children because once they have interacted with the criminal justice system, their chance of getting housing, getting a job, getting education, getting a loan, all of that stuff disappears. And the option they have is to stick with the person who is keeping them in an exploitative relationship.

MS. MESERVE: Big agenda. Catherine Chen, thank you for joining us. Chief Davis, Steve Francis, thank you all for great conversation.

(Applause)

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