

For Immediate Release

9/26/2022

From the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force

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Montana Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force Receives Prestigious National Award from the FBI

Billings, MT --- In a private ceremony in Billings with leaders from the local FBI field office and officials flown in from Salt Lake City, the FBI presented the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force with a Director's Community Leadership Award (DCLA) on behalf of the national FBI Director Christopher Wray. Special Agent in Charge of the Salt Lake City region publicly announced the award on the FBI's website on September 20, 2022. See <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/saltlakecity/news/press-releases/fbi-honors-yellowstone-county-area-human-trafficking-task-force-with-directors-community-leadership-award>. Members of the Task Force's Steering Committee accepted the award, including co-chairs Stephanie Baucus and Penny Ronning; board members Scott Koch, Melanie Tripp, and Erin Walker; and steering committee members Georgia Cady, Dr. Cynthia Brewer, and Zeno Baucus. The Task Force hosted a small reception after the presentation, where Billings Mayor Bill Cole served as the emcee.

Every year since 1990, the FBI Director has selected approximately 50 individuals or organizations from around the country, who have been nominated by their local FBI regions, to receive these awards in recognition of their "outstanding contributions to their communities through service" in fighting crime, terrorism, drug, and violence in America. While each region nominates a person or group every year, the Director does not always present an award to each region. The Task Force was nominated for a 2021 award by the Salt Lake City Division, which covers Utah, Idaho, and Montana, and FBI Director Christopher Wray honored the Task Force with the award this year. "Trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery," said Special Agent in Charge Rice. "The FBI takes a victim-centered approach, ensuring victims have access to resources while also building a case against traffickers. The FBI can't do our job combating this issue without partners like this Task Force."

Globally, human trafficking is equal to arms trafficking as the second-largest international criminal industry – behind only drug trafficking. It is estimated to be a 150 billion dollar a year industry with as many as 40 million people around the world living in slavery. In Montana, sex trafficking is more prevalent than labor trafficking, and it comes in various forms: escort services (primarily arranged online, as either in-call or out-call dates), illicit massage businesses ("IMBs"), missing and murdered indigenous persons ("MMIP"), outdoor solicitation, personal sexual servitude, services performed in strip clubs or other night clubs, and survival sex, among other forms. Some recent reports have ranked Montana fourth per capita in terms of the size of its human trafficking problem. On any given night in Billings, law enforcement officials have reported that there are anywhere between 5 and 10 women who are being actively advertised for commercial sex by their pimps.

Volunteer co-founders and co-chairs Penny Ronning and Stephanie Baucus created the Task Force in 2016 to improve coordination between law enforcement and members of the public, to help close gaps in services for victims and survivors, to increase collaboration and resource sharing, to increase awareness of sex trafficking and forced labor in the area, and to prevent human trafficking. Since its

founding, the Task Force has grown to include over 800 peoples and over 100 organizations and agencies who have participated in its projects, events, and initiatives across the state and in neighboring states as well.

The Task Force has had a variety of successful programs and initiatives over the years, and it has worked on events and projects with other nonprofits in Billings and across the State, including the Eastern Montana Human Trafficking Task Force and task forces in Missoula, Gallatin County, Cascade County, and Flathead County. Task Force leaders have distributed over 50,000 signs of trafficking cards with hotline and law enforcement phone numbers, provided over 1,000 hours of training on human trafficking and related issues, helped to launch similar task forces in other communities in Montana and in other states, helped to draft and advocate for state legislation in 2019 that increased penalties for aggravated pimping and closed loopholes in Montana's criminal laws, advocated for legislation that created the first-ever law enforcement positions at the Montana Department of Justice to focus exclusively on human trafficking, helped to shape and advocate for the City massage ordinance that is helping to close illicit massage businesses in Billings, and worked in partnership with dozens of local and national nonprofits to host events and support victims. The Task Force's conference in 2017 reached approximately 400 people.

In recognition of its leadership and impact, Task Force co-chair Penny Ronning was invited to attend a conference at the White House in 2019 on trafficking, and Task Force co-chair Stephanie Baucus was invited to author an article on fighting human trafficking in local communities for an American Bar Association magazine, which was published as a feature piece in 2020 and distributed to 250,000 print subscribers and others online. See <https://www.moultonbellingham.com/articles.php>. Led by its Prevention and Community Awareness co-chairs Melanie Tripp and Scott Koch, the Task Force has hosted annual Red Sand awareness events, developed mall billboard campaigns, partnered with Holiday Gas Stations on pop up awareness events, and created Project Hope, which provides backpacks of supplies, clothing, and hygiene products for law enforcement and service providers to distribute to victims. In partnership with End Exploitation Montana, through its Task Force liaison and board member Erin Walker, the Task Force has been active in fighting online exploitation that especially endangers at-risk youth and in reducing the demand for human trafficking. Led by Protection and Victim Services Co-Chair Dr. Cynthia Brewer, the Task Force has recently developed a healthcare protocol for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation being used by area hospitals and medical providers.

The Task Force's government, law enforcement, and prosecution partners, including FBI Special Agent Brandon Walter, FBI Victim Specialist Michele Stewart, Assistant United States Attorney Zeno Baucus, U.S. Attorney's Office Victim Witnesses Specialist Michele Stewart, and Montana Department of Justice's Supervisory Agent in Charge Andrew Yedinak, have seen significant results in recent years. Since 2017, the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office have secured federal convictions and plea bargains with sentences in several cases of over 30 years for pimps and traffickers. The Task Force has also worked actively to increase awareness of the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous people in our State, including helping to develop training conferences and hosting awareness events.

If you want to get involved in fighting human trafficking in our community, please visit www.stoptraffickingmontana.com or contact any of the Task Force's leaders.