

CEC Bulletin

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CONFERENCE ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN NORTH AMERICA

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On behalf of the CEC, I attended the “Conference On Trafficking In Persons in North America” in Washington DC on December 6 and 7, 2004. The Conference was sponsored by the Commission for Labor Cooperation. There were approximately 200 participants in the Conference, ranging from governmental departments such as the US Department of Labour and the Canadian Department of Justice to a number of non governmental organization’s from all across the US, Canada, and Mexico.

Human trafficking is a growing concern in both Canada and the US. “Trafficking in Persons” as defined by the US Department of Justice includes:

all acts involved in recruitment, abduction, transport, harboring, transfer, sale or receipt of persons within national or across international borders through force, coercion, fraud or deception, to place persons in situations of slavery like conditions, forced labour or services, such as forced prostitution, or other debt bondage.

The objective of the Conference was to raise awareness of human trafficking as a growing phenomenon in North America; exchange information on approaches by governments and non governmental organizations on combating trafficking; and explore opportunities for increased cooperation between the US, Canada, and Mexico on the issue.

Although this issue is not well known to many Canadians, it is a serious concern. Given the fact that some many trafficked individuals end up in the sex trade, it not only impacts on employment and human rights in a general way, but there are also implications specifically for the plight of women and minors. In addition, although the conference concentrated on activities which the US, Canada and Mexico should undertake, many of the trafficked individuals are coming from overseas, including China, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Russia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The Conference included presentations by representatives of the governments of the three participating countries on the approaches each is taking to combat trafficking; presentations on international and regional anti-trafficking initiatives that may have the potential for tripartite cooperation; and roundtable discussions on areas of future co-operation, and the presentation of those conclusions and proposals to the plenary session.

Some of the facts which were presented at the conference:

- At any given time in the US, there are 10,000 or more victims of forced labour (compared to 16,000 homicides in the US annually);
- 46% of trafficked persons end up in the sex trade, 27% in domestic services, and the remaining 27% in agriculture, sweatshop factories and service/food work;
- The numbers of humans trafficked each year is steadily increasing.

The reason human trafficking continues to grow is threefold:

- The demand for trafficked persons, both within the sex trade and/or as cheap forms of labour continues to grow;
- Legal protections for trafficked persons are insufficient or non-existent; and
- Monitoring and enforcement of the few protections which exist are lacking.

Some of the recommendations for a way forward include:

- Improved research to provide a better understanding of the issue;
- Effective cooperation between the US, Canada and Mexico on fighting human trafficking; and
- The establishment of a forum where research results can be exchanged between academics, policy makers and service providers

On behalf of the CEC, I acted as the moderator for the panel on which Canada Government representatives spoke about their initiatives in this area. Their presentation was excellent and generated a number of questions. The CEC received publicity both during the session, and through a number of informal discussions after the presentation and during the focus group discussions.

One interesting distinction in the law in Canada versus the US is that in the US if someone is found to be a “trafficked person”, they are allowed to remain in the country rather than be deported. This encourages trafficked individuals to come forward to the authorities, rather than continue to hide because they are afraid of deportation. This is not the situation in Canada, where individuals found in similar circumstances would be deported.

If anyone would like some additional information on this issue, please contact Tom at t.i.goldie@hydroone.com

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