

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Jun. 12, 2012

## Sex-trafficking protection law signed at Miami safe house

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C.M. GUERRERO / EL NUEVO HERALD

Florida Gov. Rick Scott signs sex-trafficking protection bills at Kristi House in Miami. With him are state Rep. Jeanette Nuñez, Sen. Anitere Flores, Attorney General Pam Bondi, advocate Nelson Diaz and Rep. Erik Fresen.

More than 8,500 young people have walked through the doors of the Kristi House, seeking a refuge from the dark world of sex trafficking.

The kids who pass through these doors are not your typical abuse victims. They've been exploited in an industry that has taken its toll on their minds and their bodies.

On Tuesday, Gov. Rick Scott was at the Kristi House to sign the Florida Safe Harbor Act, legislation that protects the young workers of the sex-trafficking industry from prosecution and also provides an avenue for them to reenter society.

"No one wants this to happen but if it does happen, they're treated with respect, as victims," Scott said.

While sex trafficking has prompted several awareness efforts internationally, the U.S. has just recently jumped onboard, with states creating measures to increase the penalties for adult predators who capitalize on the exploitation of children, and protecting the children themselves.

"It is no different if there's a monetary exchange," said Sandy Skelaney, the author of the Florida initiative and the program manager at the Kristi House. "It's still abuse."

Having worked in Thailand with an international child protection charity, Skelaney considers the issue just as crucial here.

She created the GOLD program — Girls Owning Their Lives and Dreams — to help victims at the Kristi House. But even after hundreds of success stories, Skelaney knew it wasn't enough. She approached lobbyists and lawmakers in Tallahassee seeking support.

"At the end of the day, we want them to reach a safe house, not push them deeper into a system that treats them like criminals," she said, just minutes before the governor signed HB99 and HB7049, the Senate and House bills that were the culmination of three years of grass-roots efforts and political discussion in the state Capitol building.

State Sen. Anitere Flores and Reps. Erik Fresen and Jeanette Nuñez, who also were at the ceremonial signing, cited the law as an important step to protect the state's youngest citizens, in an especially vulnerable location for trafficking. Fresen visited the Kristi House shortly after being elected. The experience urged him to advocate for the House bill.

"You can get a peek through the window of the darkness that exists on the streets of Miami and our country here," Fresen said.

Attorney General Pam Bondi, who accompanied Scott, said she watched legislators jump political hurdles to get the law on the governor's desk. The law, which gives discretion to officers to drop off young victims at a safe house instead of jail, does not protect adults who pull children into the sex-trafficking business.

By helping victims, state investigators have a better chance at prosecuting the leaders of child prostitution rings, Bondi said. State attorneys are already working on several cases.

"We are sending a united message that we will not tolerate this," Bondi said.

The Florida Safe Harbor Act passage was also backed by U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio and locally by Miami-Dade County commissioners José "Pepe" Diaz, Esteban Bovo and Audrey Edmonson.

The law is a ceremonial milestone for those who have been at the forefront of this issue for years, like Debi Harris, the president of Women's Fund of Miami-Dade. In 2007, the organization donated \$10,000 to keep the project at Kristi House running. The project for commercially sexually exploited children in Miami-Dade brought together social services, law enforcement and related agencies for the cause of rehabilitating children.

The Kristi House is actively seeking a site for an emergency shelter and drop-in center for girls. Now that the bill is in the books, Skelaney hopes it will raise awareness for this local operation.

"Nobody should have to go through that trauma alone."

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