

A Message from Florida's **Attorney General**



*Bill
McCollum*

Committed to Helping Florida's Law Enforcement Officers Protect the Public

There are few vocations as noble and revered as law enforcement. Every day, officers put their lives on the line to keep our families safe. As Floridians, we are fortunate to have more than 53,000 talented, well-trained and devoted officers protecting us from harm. Throughout my years in public service, I have been a strong supporter of the law enforcement community, working to provide the tools needed to effectively fight crime. I recognize the job is not a simple one and the parameters change on a daily basis, with either new criminal threats to our state or newer developments to currently existing threats.

One area of criminal activity that has experienced a recent and alarming surge of development is the issue of gang violence. Florida has seen the largest increase in gang activity of all 50 states within the past 25 years. Experts tell us more than 1,000 gangs with an estimated 65,000 members are active in our state. These are highly organized national and international criminal operations. They recruit new members daily, and they regularly commit violent crimes throughout Florida, crimes which have been known to include forcing members and others into prostitution and indentured servitude.

We cannot successfully address the gang problem with a fragmented or uncoordinated approach. Rather, we must

develop a cooperative, statewide strategy to correctly identify the factors contributing to the growth of gangs in our state and to initiate plans to thwart their recruitment efforts. To effectively implement such a strategy, my office will work closely with the law enforcement community to offer assistance and available resources to prevent young children from joining gangs and help those already involved with gangs to escape their influence.

In addition to threatening our children, our families and our communities, the growth of gang membership is often directly responsible for increases in criminal activities such as murders, drug trafficking and human trafficking. The trafficking of illegal substances is a significant danger that unfortunately touches many of our young citizens on a daily basis. While we are making noteworthy progress in the war against drugs within Florida's borders, we must continue to take an aggressive, zero-tolerance approach, something only possible with a close partnership with the law enforcement community.

In April, I attended a national conference focused on combating methamphetamine trafficking in the United States. The event was sponsored by the National Association of Attorneys General and highlighted the growing success in reducing the number of domestic methamphetamine labs. The increased focus of law enforcement efforts in this area coupled with safeguards put in place to prevent the purchase of large amounts of meth-cooking ingredients and multiple revisions to criminal sentencing are achieving desired reductions in locally produced methamphetamine and for that, the law enforcement community has my deepest gratitude and respect. Unfortunately, this has led to an expansion of interstate trafficking by methamphetamine dealers as they are forced to move their product over larger distances. My office is committed to helping Florida's law enforcement officers continue their efforts to protect our communities from individuals who distribute these poisons.

In addition to the trafficking of illegal substances, a far more nefarious version of trafficking often affects our state out of view from everyday society. Human trafficking is a crime with hidden victims. This modern-day slavery turns human lives into business transactions and deprives victims of the most basic human right—the right to freedom.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, human trafficking is the second largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world. With Florida's unique geography, rapidly growing population and huge influx of visitors every year, our state is at an elevated risk for being affected by this insidious crime.

Victims of human trafficking are predominantly forced to work in prostitution or the sex entertainment industry; however other forms of labor exploitation are also prevalent, including domestic servitude and sweatshop factory work. Trafficked victims are difficult to identify for many reasons, primarily because their captors instill fear in them through various methods to keep them enslaved. Whether by force or by coercion, many victims believe they have no means to escape their situation and remain in bondage indefinitely.

To successfully combat the growing problem of human trafficking we know that it requires many partnerships—partnerships with other nations, federal, state and local law enforcement, faith-based and other non-profit organizations.

At the federal level, one of the most important tools for fighting human trafficking was the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 which makes human trafficking a federal crime and gives eligibility to

victims of severe forms of trafficking for the benefits and services available for refugees.

Here at the state level, I want to bring attention to the plight of those who are victimized by this crime and ensure that traffickers are put where they belong—behind bars.

Properly identifying victims has long been a problem but I am pleased to announce that earlier this month, the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission added training on human trafficking crime prevention and investigation as part of the basic skills course for all Florida law enforcement officers. This additional training will heighten awareness and allow law enforcement to bring more traffickers to justice.

Gang violence, drug trafficking and human trafficking are extremely serious issues, and it takes a dedicated and determined group of men and women to mount a daily defense on our behalf. As Florida's Attorney General, I pledge to continue supporting these efforts and anticipate many successful partnerships in the years to come. Recognizing the importance of a collaborative effort to promote our state's safety, I have made it a priority to meet regularly with a group of advisors who provide insight and recommendations for supporting Florida's men and women in law enforcement. I want to ensure that we are not only working together in effective partnerships, but also that my office is properly serving law enforcement officers throughout our state. As Florida's Attorney General, I pledge to do whatever I can to aid the consistent efforts of law enforcement as they work daily to protect our citizens. ■

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Attorney General McCollum with SCO Chapter correctional officers.

What Parents Can Do to Prevent Gang Involvement

- Spend quality time with your child
- Get involved in your child's school activities
- Be a positive role model and set the right example
- Know your child's friends and their families
- Encourage good study habits
- Teach your child how to cope with peer pressure
- Help your child develop good conflict/resolution skills (See www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/conflict.asp)
- Encourage your child to participate in positive afterschool activities with adult supervision (recreation centers, organized sports, youth groups)
- Take action in your neighborhood (create a neighborhood alliance, report and remove graffiti)
- Talk with your child about the dangers and consequences of gang involvement. Let your child know that you don't want to see him or her hurt or arrested. Explain to your child that he or she should NOT:
 - Associate with gang members
 - Attend parties or social events sponsored by gangs
 - Use hand signs, symbols, or language that is meaningful to gangs
 - Wear clothing, including specific colors, which may have meaning to gangs in your area

www.cops.usdoj.gov
www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org
www.fbi.gov

To obtain details on COPS programs, call the

COPS Office Response Center at 1.800.421.6770