

Ames Tribune

City Council: Proclamation of Human Trafficking and Slavery Week a step in the right direction

By Robbie Sequeira, Staff Writer rsequeira@amestrib.com

Posted Jan 8, 2019 at 2:29 PM

Updated Jan 8, 2019 at 9:56 PM

For Ames native, and Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking (NAHT) Director George Belitsos, Tuesday's Ames City Council Proclamation of National Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness Week (Jan. 6 to 12) — was a step in the right direction.

But for Belitsos, there is a persistent fear Ames is lagging behind surrounding cities in preventing human trafficking at the local level.

“Ames is one of the most vulnerable cities when it comes to human trafficking, because of the victimization of college demographics and our lack of preventive methods against traffickers moonlighting as rogue businesses,” Belitsos said Tuesday.

Human trafficking isn't a foreign phenomenon to the city of Ames. In May 2016, two Ames massage businesses were shut down for separate charges of prostitution and practicing without a license.

Despite the three arrests from the sting, the owners of the establishments have yet to be identified or charged.

But that's common for human trafficking operations — destroying all paper trails or traces of their acts before heading off to the next town.

According to the NAHT, 9,000 illicit massage businesses are currently open for business nationwide generating \$2.5 billion in revenue.

Belitsos fears without appropriate legislation, Ames might become a haven for potential human trafficking opportunists.

According to World Population Overview, residents in the 18 to 24 female demographic make up the second-largest age group in the city, accounting for about 37.5 percent of the city's total population.

In Iowa, 14 cities have passed ordinances requiring massage therapists to obtain a business license from the city, which they say would allow law enforcement to discern reputable practitioners from disreputable ones.

Ames could be the 15th city in Iowa to adopt a similar ordinance, depending upon the success of a workshop and vote scheduled for the April 16 City Council meeting.

"If we are able to pass an ordinance requiring background checks, vetting standards, and prevent online trafficking ads — we'll go a long way in warding off would-be traffickers," Belitsos said.

Some of the resolutions proposed by the NAHT to crackdown on exploitative businesses involve regulating hours of operation, extensive background checks, vetting internet listings and ads, and ending whack-a-mole stings where victims are arrested and traffickers go free.

In his first year as director, Belitsos reached out to then-Gov. Terry Branstad about making a public proclamation for the month of January to be recognized as Human Trafficking and Slavery Awareness Month.

The initiative reached fruition under Gov. Kim Reynolds, who made the initiative to recognize January as Slavery and Human Trafficking Month.

From there, Belitsos localized his campaign, drafting up custom-made proclamation memos and scripts resulting in Tuesday night's proclamation.

"The message is that this can happen anywhere, and it's not just a national issue, but a local one," he said.

In other news

The council approved its part in the 28E Agreement regarding the purchase of the interoperable communication system StoryComm.

The council passed an ordinance that would remove multi-family residential properties from the list of property types that require individual water metering.

The council adopted an ordinance establishing parking regulations on Suncrest Drive from Red Fox Road to Cedar Lane.

During the public forum portion of the meeting, Citizens Actualizing and Understanding Sustainable Environment (CAUSE) — an Ames High School sustainability group, generated over 613 signatures to request the City Council adopt a climate action plan to fight climate change.

Assistant City Manager Brian Phillips delivered the staff report regarding the Human Services Capital Grant Program. United Way of Story County partnered with the Human Services Capital Grant Program to help agencies fund projects aimed at improving quality of life and housing. The unused funds not authorized to be used (split between general fund balance and local sales tax) go back to the fund balances and are allocated toward other relevant activities. The Council agreed to initiate a new round for the 2019-20 fiscal year of \$250,000 and revamp the agreement with United Way of Story County.

The Campus and Community Commission presented a follow-up on its community task. Councilwoman Gloria Betcher raised concerns the report lacked any mentions of Ames, and their efforts to provide a welcoming air of inclusiveness for both Iowa State students and the community. The commission noted it focused on examining the success of the diversity programs at Iowa State University as a complement to other reports on community inclusiveness reports, mainly using poster and community events to lower the rate of racial-bias incidents at ISU. The council made a request the committee and the university expand their principles of inclusiveness to include the Ames community. The council agreed to table a further discussion in the coming weeks.