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A group including students from Sacred Heart Academy and Presentation Academy in Louisville, Ky., attend a prayer service for victims of human trafficking in 2019 in downtown Louisville. At a June 6, 2024, briefing at the Capitol, representatives from the Alliance to End Human Trafficking and the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd urged passage of three measures they said would aid efforts to combat the practice, including HR 5856, the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act.. (OSV News/CNS file, Ruby Thomas, The Record)

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A trio of bills to combat human trafficking sought by Catholic advocates faces an uncertain future in Congress amid a wider debate over immigration policy.

At a June 6 briefing at the Capitol, representatives from the Alliance to End Human Trafficking and the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd pointed to three bills they said would aid efforts to combat the practice: HR 5856, the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2023; HR 1325, the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act of 2023; and HR 6145, Immigration Court Efficiency and Children's Court Act of 2023.

Sister Brigid Lawlor, founder of the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, or NAC, and a sister of that community, said the issues of human trafficking and forced migration are closely linked.

"We have seen firsthand how traffickers prey on those forced to flee their homes by circumstances beyond their control," she said in remarks at the briefing. "We all know what they are, could be floods, famine or gang violence, domestic violence, poverty, persecution and political corruption."

Ending human trafficking, she said, "is a bipartisan issue with bipartisan solutions," pointing to both Republican and Democratic staffers in attendance. "We need legislative action to address these particular trafficking vulnerabilities."

The House in February approved the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act with a broad, bipartisan majority. The

office of Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., said it includes age-appropriate prevention and education initiatives for elementary and middle schools and funds for survivors' employment, housing and education, among other initiatives. The bill was sent to the Senate and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations, which has not yet moved to advance it. That legislation also is supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act and its Senate companion, S 255, would shorten the waiting period for asylees to be granted work permits, allowing them to seek employment and reducing their vulnerability to traffickers, supporters said. The USCCB also supports that legislation. The House and Senate versions of that legislation have yet to be taken up by their relevant committees.

The bipartisan Immigration Court Efficiency and Children's Court Act, which supporters say would reduce the immigration court backlog and strengthen due process rights for children in that process, also has yet to be taken up by the House Judiciary Committee.

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But key provisions of that legislation were among the Biden administration's December 2023 executive action on immigration, establishing separate dockets focused on the adjudication of unaccompanied children's removal proceedings. Rep. Dan Goldman, D-N.Y., praised that move in a December statement as "welcome progress" but argued "we must build on this effort from the Executive Branch by passing my bipartisan Children's Court Act to codify the creation of a separate Children's Court into law."

Congressional staffers in the House and Senate who spoke with OSV News about the bills' prospects were unable to provide information about a timeline for advancing them, with one suggesting that any legislation dealing with immigration is getting caught up in wider debates over the border, even if the items have nothing to do with the border.

Lawmakers have repeatedly found themselves at an impasse on immigration as a bipartisan border deal failed multiple times in 2024, as Republicans in the Senate and the House who are aligned with former President Donald Trump, the frontrunner

for the Republican presidential nomination, eventually rejected the deal. Despite his own hardline stance on immigration policy, Trump has argued passing the bill would aid President Joe Biden in the November election.

But, advocates seemed optimistic about their efforts at the briefing.

Fran Eskin-Royer, executive director of NAC, said in a statement issued ahead of the briefing, "There is widespread consensus on the urgent need to combat human trafficking, but there is little understanding of systemic, root causes, like forced migration, and the need to address the U.S. policies that may inadvertently facilitate the exploitation of migrants and immigrants by traffickers."

"Looking at where our two organizations could affect change and break a few links between human trafficking and forced migration, we selected three discrete areas with legislative solutions already proposed," she said. "Help people be safe and be able to support themselves in their home countries and thus avoid the dangerous journey altogether. Improve immigration proceedings for unaccompanied children and be a formal process to combat human trafficking. Speed up the process of allowing asylum seekers to find legal work so that they do not languish and become victims of trafficking."