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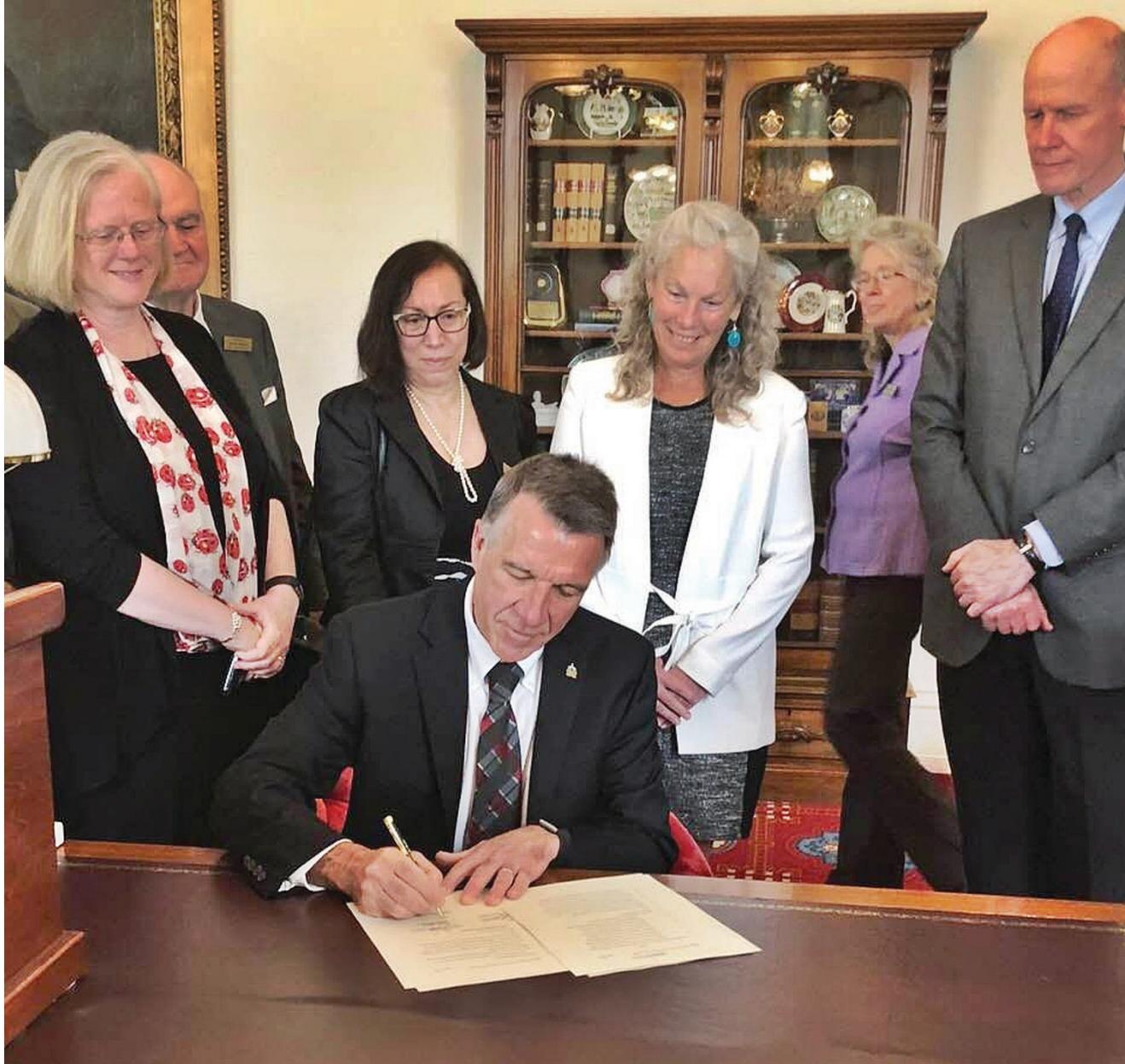
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Human trafficking bill signed by governor



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State Reps. Susan Buckholz, Ben Joseph, Linda Joy Sullivan, Maxine Grad, Kimberly Jessup and Bill Botzow watch Gov. Phil Scott sign H.603 on Wednesday, a bill addressing human trafficking exploitation.

SUPPLIED PHOTO

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By Jim Therrien, Banner/VTDigger

BENNINGTON — Unlike several funding bills this session, legislation addressing the effects of human trafficking found wide support, passed the Legislature and was signed by Gov. Phil Scott.

"Although slavery is commonly thought to be a thing of the past, human traffickers generate hundreds of billions of dollars in profits by trapping millions of people in horrific situations around the world, including here in the U.S.," said one of the bill's co-sponsors, Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, D-Dorset.

The legislation, H.630, was co-sponsored by Rep. Susan Buckholz, D-Hartford, and a number of other lawmakers joined as sponsors after the bill was filed in January.

During the signing Wednesday at the Statehouse, Scott said, "This bill is another important step in protecting vulnerable Vermonters" against what he termed "this type of dehumanization and the suffering that comes along with it."

Buckholz said her awareness of the issue dates back 18 years to a case she worked on as an attorney in Juvenile Court. At that time, she said, there seemed to be little recognition of human trafficking and no way to deal with it through the Vermont legal system.

"Nobody could comprehend that that was happening here," she said.

"So I find it very gratifying that, 18 years later, we were actually able to get this bill through and people recognize what needs to happen," Buckholz said at the bill signing.

Founded organization

Sullivan is the co-founder and former executive director of Building Empowerment By Stopping Trafficking, which has assisted more than 3,000 victims of human trafficking in 24 states and eight nations.

"Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery that occurs in every state," she said Wednesday. "Organizations work closely with service providers, law enforcement, and other professionals in Vermont to serve victims and survivors of trafficking, respond to human trafficking cases, and share information and resources."

Helping the victims of trafficking abuses and intimidation "does not happen overnight; it is a very slow process," she said. "That is why we need to have as many resources as possible."

The new law, Sullivan said, will allow "a more concentrated effort" involving multiple stakeholders throughout the state.

Vermont has some specific vulnerabilities to these forms of abuse, she said, listing a lack of training in the issue for professionals; a perception of a "liberal court system" in Vermont; ignorance concerning the issue, silence, and a lack of discussion; the belief that "bad things don't happen in Vermont," and that trafficking only occurs in large cities and/or in refugee populations;" an overwhelmed human services system, the opioid epidemic, and a shortage of drug treatment facilities.

The policy in Vermont regarding parent-child contact in divorce and parentage cases, she said, is that children are entitled to maximum contact with both of their parents when it can be provided safely and appropriately. Sullivan and Buckholz said that can make it difficult for judges to issue a ruling shielding child victims of human trafficking, but the new law will allow more discretion.

"Our bill provides the same protection for mothers whose child or children are the result of a relationship with a sex trafficker by adding words to the provisions that protect victims of sexual assault," Sullivan said.

In addition, she said, "the bill removes the prohibition against the granting of an annulment where a victim of human trafficking lived 'voluntarily' after the marriage with their trafficker, as the coercion factor in that situation does not allow for a victim to be able to make any such decision."

She termed H.630 "a valuable tool for the legal system when it comes to the investigation and defense and safeguarding of human trafficking victims and their children."

"This law does not affect a lot of folks directly, but the effect on those victims and children is huge," Buckholz said.

Of the bipartisan support the bill received, Sullivan said, "I pride myself in working across the party lines and I value the input of stakeholders. This bill is proof that we must unite for the best interests of Vermonters."

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