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CONTACT: Megan Fowler, 202-540-5231, mfowler@polarisproject.org

Majority of States Actively Passing Laws to Combat Human Trafficking

Polaris Project 2012 Annual Ratings Show Massachusetts as Most Improved, Wyoming as Faltering

CHICAGO, IL (August 7, 2012) – More than half of states have passed laws to combat human trafficking, punish traffickers and support survivors in the past year, Polaris Project announced today during the launch of its 2012 Annual Ratings Map on state human trafficking laws. Twenty-eight states (55%) passed new laws in the past year. A law passed last November in Massachusetts catapulted the state from the worst tier to the best, earning a “Most Improved” distinction. South Carolina, West Virginia and Ohio were also applauded for their improvements. Wyoming has yet to pass any law against human trafficking, making it one of Polaris Project’s “Faltering Four” with Arkansas, Montana and South Dakota.

“Passing strong state laws is a critical step to increasing prosecutions of traffickers and providing local support for survivors,” said Mary Ellison, Polaris Project’s Director of Policy. “It is exciting to see so many state policy makers actively seeking ways to stop human trafficking, but using these new laws to save lives and hold traffickers accountable is what we are ultimately striving for. While states like Washington and Massachusetts are clearly at the top of the pack in our ratings, every state can and should do more to improve and implement their laws.”

Polaris Project rated all 50 states and the District of Columbia based on ten categories of laws that are critical to a basic legal framework that addresses this crime and human rights abuse. Each state is placed in one of four tiers based on whether it has passed legislation in each of the ten categories. Twenty-one states are currently in the top category, Tier 1, up from 11 states in 2011. Only four are in the bottom category of Tier 4, down from nine states in 2011. One-third of states increased their rating by at least one tier. Washington had the highest point total, with 11 out of 12, while Wyoming is lowest with -2 points. Massachusetts and West Virginia particularly stand out for passing their first human trafficking laws in the past year.

“Massachusetts has taken major steps to combat the egregious crime of human trafficking, and we are pleased that this report recognizes those efforts,” said Attorney General Martha Coakley. “We continue to work towards a successful implementation of the new law through investigations, prosecutions, and policy change and look forward to working with stakeholders to end the exploitation of people in our Commonwealth.”

Despite improvements in laws across the country, few states passed “Safe Harbor” laws. These laws state that children under the age of 18 who are involved in commercial sex acts should not be treated as criminals for acts to which they can’t legally consent, but instead should be recognized as victims of sex trafficking who are in need of services and support. Strong Safe Harbor laws grant immunity from prosecution or divert the child from juvenile delinquency proceedings, as well as offer protection and access to child welfare services. Only eight states received full credit for having a Safe Harbor law which includes provisions to protect children and also to provide services for the victim.

More than a decade after the passage of the federal anti-trafficking law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), 47 states and D.C., have sex trafficking criminal statutes, and 49 states and DC have labor trafficking criminal statutes. Although the TVPA has been reauthorized 3 times by bipartisan majorities, Congress allowed the Act to expire in September of 2011. The current Senate bill, S. 1301, has 46 cosponsors.

“In every state in our country, as well as globally, traffickers are enslaving victims by forcing or manipulating them to work or perform commercial sex acts,” continued Ms. Ellison. “We look forward to continuing to work with state legislators to develop tools to stop this horrendous human rights abuse. And we encourage Congress to pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act and other anti-trafficking bills to ensure that our federal laws stay strong.”

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline, operated by Polaris Project since December 2007, has received more than 57,000 calls from every state in the country, and connected more than 6,700 potential victims to services. Incidences of sex and labor trafficking have been reported to the hotline in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the U.S. in the last two years. Twelve states have passed laws requiring or encouraging the posting of the national human trafficking hotline. To report a tip, connect with anti-trafficking services in your area, or request information, call The National Human Trafficking Resource Center at: **1-888-3737-888**.

The state ratings map and methodology, as well as tailored state-by-state reports, are available at <http://www.PolarisProject.org/2012StateRatings>.

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About Polaris Project

Polaris Project is one of the leading organizations in the global fight against human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Named after the North Star "Polaris" that guided slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad, Polaris Project is transforming the way that individuals and communities respond to human trafficking, in the U.S. and globally. By successfully pushing for stronger federal and state laws, operating the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline (1-888-373-7888), conducting trainings, and providing vital services to victims of trafficking, Polaris Project creates long-term solutions that move our society closer to a world without slavery. Learn more at www.polarisproject.org.