

# Former U.S. Congresswoman Linda Smith Urges Washington Legislature to Pass HB 2526 to Increase Penalties for Sex Buyers

*"One to two children every week. That's how many Seattle Police pull from sex trafficking on Aurora Avenue North alone, while many more are recruited online."*

OLYMPIA, WA, UNITED STATES, February 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Former U.S. Congresswoman Linda Smith](#) Urges Washington Legislature to [Pass HB 2526](#) to Increase Penalties for Sex Buyers and Protect Trafficking Victims

"One to two children every week"—Seattle Police report worsening crisis as buyers demand younger victims; Smith says current misdemeanor penalties "are not enough"



Former U.S. Congresswoman and Shared Hope International Founder Linda Smith is urging Washington lawmakers to pass House Bill 2526, legislation that would make purchasing sex a Class C felony on the third or subsequent offense and strengthen protections for trafficking victims.

In a powerful [op-ed](#) released today, Smith—who represented Washington's 3rd Congressional District and served 15 years in elected office before founding the international anti-trafficking organization—details the escalating crisis facing Washington children and calls the current misdemeanor penalty structure inadequate.

"One to two children every week. That's how many Seattle Police pull from sex trafficking on Aurora Avenue North alone, while many more are recruited online," Smith writes. "Detective Maurice Washington told state lawmakers the crisis has worsened; 'the tools we currently have

are not enough."

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 89 percent of Washington sex trafficking victims who reported their age were children when first exploited. Smith notes that buyers are demanding younger and younger victims, with children now being targeted and groomed through their mobile devices.

Smith recounts working with a Southwest Washington family whose 12-year-old daughter was groomed online for months, communicating with her trafficker nightly from 1-3 AM. Police arrested the trafficker in Florida—with a ticket to Portland, Oregon, just across the river from the child's home.



Shared Hope International

## HB 2526: Comprehensive Approach to Demand and Victim Protection

Sponsored by Rep. Chris Stearns, HB 2526 takes a two-pronged approach:

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*Linda Smith*

### Buyer Accountability:

- Makes purchasing sex a Class C felony on third or subsequent offense (up to 5 years imprisonment)
- Raises fines from \$1,000 to \$3,000–\$10,000 based on prior offenses
- Directs 98% of fees to community-based, survivor-led organizations for housing, trauma therapy, job training, and legal assistance

### Victim Protection:

- Requires law enforcement to refer individuals to services for first and second violations
- Removes barriers to help-seeking by prohibiting arrest when victims report other crimes

"Right now, buying sex is a misdemeanor—carrying fewer penalties than shoplifting," Smith states. "When purchasing sex has minimal consequences, trafficking remains profitable and demand grows."

### Expert Available for Interview

Linda Smith brings unparalleled expertise on sex trafficking policy and frontline experience

combating exploitation both domestically and internationally. She is available for interviews to discuss:

- The scope of child sex trafficking in Washington State
- How online exploitation has changed the trafficking landscape
- Why current buyer penalties fail to deter demand
- How HB 2526 balances accountability with victim protection
- Washington's opportunity to lead on anti-trafficking responses

Smith's research publications include "Demand" and "Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: The Prostitution of America's Children." She currently serves on the Washington State Task Force Against Trafficking in Persons and the Youth Human Trafficking State Coordinating Committee.

### Smith's Message to Lawmakers and Communities

In her op-ed, Smith issues direct calls to action:

- To legislators: Pass HB 2526
- To law enforcement: "You've asked for better tools—this gives you one"
- To community members: Report suspected trafficking to 1-888-373-7888
- To survivors: "We see you. You deserve safety, services, and support—not criminalization"

"The Legislature has a choice: maintain the status quo where buying another human being carries fewer penalties than shoplifting, or declare that in Washington, we protect the vulnerable and hold exploiters accountable," Smith concludes. "Pass HB 2526. Do it now."

### About Linda Smith

Linda Smith is founder and president of Shared Hope International, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing and eradicating sex trafficking. She represented the 18th Legislative District in the Washington State House and Senate (1983-1994) and Washington's 3rd Congressional District in the U.S. House (1995-1999). She founded Shared Hope International in 1998 after witnessing children sold in brothels overseas.

### About Shared Hope International

Shared Hope International is a nonprofit organization that exists to prevent and eradicate sex trafficking through awareness, education, legal reform, and survivor care. For more information, visit [sharedhope.org](http://sharedhope.org).

To schedule an interview with Linda Smith, contact Elizabeth Freisinger, Media Relations, at 866-437-5433 or [elizabeth@sharedhope.org](mailto:elizabeth@sharedhope.org).

Full op-ed available upon request.

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