Good afternoon and thank you all for being here today.

If it seems a little crowded here in this room, it's because there are a lot of people who are very passionate about this issue, and we're glad to have them with us here today as we put pen to paper and strike a blow against a serious crime that occurs in secret all across our state and nation.

I would like to start by thanking the sponsor of this bill, SEN Leticia Van De Putte. She is joined by the bill's author, REP Randy Weber, from Pearland.

You truly are champions for these invisible victims and we are fortunate to have you leading the charge for justice.

Also here are supporters from community groups, universities and state agencies, all of whom are working to peel back the veil of secrecy on the scourge of human trafficking and, ultimately, wipe it out.

Human trafficking is a serious problem, and this legislation sends a message to those who would profit from exploiting others in this fashion - Texas won't stand for it.

Through our state’s border security efforts, investing more than $100 million in each of the last two legislative sessions, we have made a dent in illegal border crossings and reduced the incidence of smuggling.

However, our grasp of the size of the human trafficking situation is still a little hazy.

We know that some twenty percent of our country’s trafficking victims pass through our state every year.

We can cite the State Department statistics, that, every year, between 14,500 and 17,500 people are victims of trafficking in our country.

The fact we have to use a range of numbers in describing the problem is proof that we don't know all we could or should about this problem.

The taskforce created by this bill will go a long way toward bringing the realities of this abhorrent practice into sharp focus, and helping us turn the tide against a crime that primarily targets women and children.
Under the skilled leadership of Attorney General Abbott, I’m confident that this taskforce, with its balanced mix of law enforcement, advocacy groups and state agencies, will leave no stone unturned in rooting out this problem.

By providing training to law enforcement, this bill will equip the men and women in uniform who protect our citizens with the knowledge to better protect the victims of trafficking.

By protecting the victims of trafficking from prosecution for their offenses committed under duress, this bill will make it easier for them to step forward and seek help from authorities empowered to protect them.

I am proud to sign this legislation as a way to continue the good work of the people in this room, bring this human tragedy into the public eye, and bring an end to this insidious practice.

REP Weber, on behalf of our state, I thank you for authoring this bill and would like to invite you to share your thoughts on the issue.

[WEBER SPEAKS]

Thank you, Randy. Now, to share her perspective on this important bill, I would like to announce its sponsor, Senator Leticia Van de Putte. Senator?

[VAN DE PUTTE SPEAKS]

Thank you, Senator. Now, let’s get down to business and sign this bill.

Now, we’d be happy to take questions from our friends in the working press about this bill.