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QUEENS DISTRICT ATTORNEY MELINDA KATZ
ANNOUNCES HUMAN TRAFFICKING BUREAU
First Prosecutors Office in City to Have Dedicated Bureau

District Attorney Melinda Katz today announced the creation of a Human Trafficking Bureau that is exclusively dedicated to combating human trafficking in Queens County. This newly formed Bureau will combat sex and labor trafficking by aggressively prosecuting traffickers and buyers of sex and will also connect survivors of trafficking with meaningful services to empower them to escape their traffickers, and provide community outreach, education and information aimed toward preventing and identifying trafficking in our communities.

District Attorney Katz said, “The sex trafficking industry is a brutal, degrading and illegal enterprise that far too often profits by forcing women, children and members of our transgender community into prostitution. But there are other forms of trafficking, such as forcing individuals to work with little or no pay. This new and dedicated Bureau within my Office, will combat those who would victimize others with aggressive investigations to end this industry. But, I want to be clear that we are also here to help the victims find a path to freedom with services and programs that will give them positive change in their lives and a future without fear.”

The 2019 Trafficking in Persons Report, issued by the U.S. Department of State, reveals that a staggering 24.9 million people are robbed of their freedom and basic human dignity by sex and labor traffickers. Here in the United States, traffickers often use violence, threats, deception, debt bondage and other manipulative tactics to force people to engage in commercial sex or to provide labor or services against their will.

Queens County is leading in New York City with its rich cultural and ethnic diversity. We are home to 2 international airports and home to a large percentage of foreign born and undocumented persons. Therefore, Queens is a prime geographical location for traffickers to target and exploit those most at risk. Trafficking is not only a local issue, but one involving our world community. Traffickers often target already vulnerable and marginalized members of our society, such as our homeless youth, undocumented immigrants, those with substance abuse or mental health issues, as well as those who face discrimination or gender inequality, and have little economic or social support systems. With respect to foreign born and undocumented

persons, traffickers routinely use threats and fear of imprisonment and deportation to maintain control over their victims to continue their exploitation.

In responding to this epidemic and advancing her anti-trafficking policies the District Attorney said this newly formed Human Trafficking Bureau will have a dedicated staff of assistant district attorneys, social workers, detectives and analysts. The Bureau will connect those who are being victimized or commercially exploited within Queens County to meaningful services, support and tools to enable them to safely exit the sex trade industry or their traffickers.

At the same time, District Attorney Katz said, she is focused on holding traffickers and buyers of sex accountable for their role in the facilitation of human trafficking. Recent prosecutions demonstrate this. In January 2020, 23-year-old Tyquan Henderson was convicted of sex trafficking a 16-year-old victim. This defendant is awaiting sentencing at which time he faces up to 9 years in prison.

In February 2020, said DA Katz, defendant David Viltus, 31, pleaded guilty to attempted murder for the heinous attack against his transgender girlfriend. The defendant repeatedly stabbed her in the head and face after she refused to continue to engage in prostitution. Viltus is expected to be sentenced to 10 years in prison later this month. In another case, defendant Julius Heusner, 27, was sentenced on a felony charge of aggravated patronizing a minor for prostitution, related to paying a 16-year-old child to perform sex acts on him in a parked car. The defendant is required to register as a sex offender and complete a program designed to educate and deter buyers of sex from continuing to exploit young women sexually.

These convictions, said DA Katz, demonstrate our commitment to aggressively investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of these degrading crimes that deprive many vulnerable members of our community of their liberty and free will. Human trafficking is a horrific form of modern-day slavery.

In creating the Human Trafficking Bureau, District Attorney Katz announced that she has appointed career prosecutor Jessica L. Melton as the chief. Since 2007, when New York State's first Sex and Labor Trafficking laws took effect 13 years ago, ADA Melton has focused her career solely on the prosecution of human trafficking and related crimes. She obtained the first conviction for sex trafficking in New York State and the first labor trafficking conviction in Queens County. In 2013, she was awarded the prestigious Thomas E. Dewey medal by the New York City Bar Association for her work in combating human trafficking.

The Human Trafficking Bureau will operate within the District Attorney's Office's Investigations Division under the overall supervision of Executive District Attorney Gerard A. Brave.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.