

Human Rights Campaign Assessment Paper: The Polaris Project

In a world where human rights are constantly tested and overlooked, the issue of human trafficking remains a major problem and a difficult issue. Polaris Project, founded in 2002, fights against human trafficking and all forms of modern-day slavery. It was one of the nation's first grassroots initiatives against human trafficking, and has remained a valuable organization for the past ten years. Various people and groups have recognized the organization as a powerful and well-intended organization, but, obviously, the problem of human trafficking is still at large. Polaris Project works to improve and transform the way communities respond to the issue of human trafficking nationally and globally. Beyond having a National Human Trafficking hotline, Polaris Project main objectives and concerns are policy outreach and client services, trying, with limited resources, to achieve a world without slavery. As their organization claims, "By successfully pushing for stronger federal and state laws, operating the National Human Trafficking Resource Hotline, conducting human 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."¹ While some of Polaris Project's campaign strategies, like lobbying and policy advocacy, have been very successful, improvements in the campaign can be made in other areas.

I. Lobbying

¹ "Polaris Project Overview," accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/about-us/overview>

Polaris Project's strength and main objective is policy advocacy on both the state and federal levels. On the legislative level, Polaris Project has had many successes. In 2004, the organization, by filming sex trafficking footage on the streets of downtown Washington, D.C., helped influence the launch of a D.C. Human Trafficking Task Force. For the past ten years, the organization has worked with congress, lobbying to pass better federal legislation on human trafficking. An example of this influence was in 2005 when Polaris Project helped win passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), which increased programs for trafficking victims in the United States.² Polaris Project urges Congress to move forward quickly in order to make a difference. The organization “tracks, drafts, and analyzes legislation; drafts model laws and guidelines; provides and presents testimony, and engages the public through policy advocacy and grassroots outreach.”³ Polaris Project hopes to hold human traffickers accountable, increase protection of human trafficking, create services available to victims, increase funds for anti-human trafficking, spread awareness of the issue, and create an improved federal structure for combatting this issue.⁴ The organization hopes to strengthen existing laws including, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), the Federal Mann Act, and the PROTECT Act.

Polaris Project has also had great success on the state level. In 2011 alone, Polaris Project helped to pass 18 state-level bills “aimed at strengthening the anti-

² “Polaris Project 10 Years of Impact” accessed 13 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/about-us/10-years-of-impact>

³ “Polaris Project What We Do, Policy Advocacy” accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy>

⁴ “Polaris Project, What We Do, Policy Advocacy, Legislative Toolbox, accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/legislative-toolbox>

trafficking legal framework to ensure that victims are helped and perpetrators are punished.”⁵ The organization works on the state level to get to the more immediate issues in communities themselves. Polaris Project finds the state laws to be more comprehensive and victim-oriented, which can create greater community awareness, increase local media attention, and lead to more victim identification and protection, as well as prosecutions of the traffickers.⁶

As proven by their successes, Polaris Project’s strategies for lobbying have been very successful in the past ten years. Lobbying is an important part of the Polaris Project campaign, and probably its most important and effective campaign strategy in combatting modern-day slavery in the United States. With pushes from Polaris Project and similar organizations, President Obama committed to fight human trafficking on September 25, 2012. President Obama hopes to strengthen the zero-tolerance policy on human trafficking, increase tools and training to identify and assist trafficking victims, increase resources for victims, and create a comprehensive and ambitious plan for the future.⁷ Polaris Project is working toward these same goals, and with their influence, the president and Congress have found it to be a pressing issue. Human trafficking is widely agreed to be a human rights issue of great importance in the United States, but because it might not affect everyone directly, it does not seem like the most pressing issue. President Obama and the Polaris Project take a different stance. Human

⁵ “Polaris Project 2011 Highlights,” accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/about-us/successes>

⁶ “Polaris Project What We Do, Policy Advocacy State Policy,” accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/state-policy>

⁷ “White House Fact Sheets” accessed 13 October 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/fact-sheet-obama-administration-announces-efforts-combat-human-trafficki>

trafficking affects everyone in society, and is an issue as pressing and urgent as any other issue of this time. In these ways, Polaris Project's campaign strategy of lobbying has been very successful, and can only get stronger.

II. Shamming, Framing and "Othering"

In the case of human trafficking in the United States, it is easy to frame the issue as morally wrong, because most people find it an injustice to human rights. Polaris Project does a good job of shaming in their campaigns because the organization emphasizes that those who have been affected by the modern forms of slavery are not criminals, but victims. They emphasize this point with governments and society in general.

One of the goals of Polaris Project is transforming the way people look at and think about human trafficking. Framing is an important aspect of the way Polaris Project presents its campaigns. Polaris Project hopes to "shift the paradigm" from treating victims of human trafficking as criminals, to people who need to be protected, treated with dignity, and provided with services they deserve.⁸ By framing human trafficking in a different light like this, they are encouraging communities and people to find sympathy for these victims.

Through information provided on their website, including a map of the legislation passed in each state in the United States, Polaris Project brings the issue closer to home, because in framing the issue as a local problem, people can understand the

⁸ "Polaris Project Client Services" accessed 13 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/client-services>

impact human trafficking has on their own state and community, and this hits home with many people. In addition, victims of these crimes are able to understand the legislation in their state and seek help through people in their own community or, in states where legislation is not up to par, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

The organization, however, does not humanize their victims by demonizing those who commit the crimes of human trafficking. By emphasizing the cruelty of the people who are committing these crimes against human rights and showing the need to prosecute those who have wronged these victims, Polaris Project could humanize the victims and create sympathy for these people in society. By providing more numbers and statistics about trafficking and those victims, more people would be able to understand the impact of these crimes and feel the need to take action. In addition, more victims may feel comfortable seeking help and services to recover from their experiences. In this way, Polaris Project's campaigns can be improved.

III. Media, Communications, and Recognition

In the past ten years, support for ending or combatting human trafficking has greatly grown in the United States. Polaris Project has also expanded in their ten years, including creating Polaris Project Japan, and expanding victim services to various states.⁹ Media coverage because of organizations like Polaris Project has brought human trafficking to the public consciousness, especially in recent years. However, improvements in this strategy can be made.

⁹ "Polaris Project Ten Years of Impact" accessed 12 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/about-us/10-years-of-impact>

The organization often publishes press releases, but these releases should also be sent to media outlets to gain greater attention. Without searching for this information, many people do not hear about these issues as often as possible. In a world where media sets the agenda of what people in society think about, an issue as prominent and pressing as human trafficking should one that is covered often.

Polaris Project does use social media, which has become an important way of communicating in this digital age, and this strategy is vital for getting information out to the public, especially the youth who aim to make a difference in the world of human trafficking and human rights. Polaris Project often posts on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Especially posting in posting to YouTube, the organization is able to spread awareness and gain support in their cause through the power of images and videos.

In addition to using media communications to the best of their ability, Polaris Project effectively tracks and reports on media coverage of the issue of human trafficking, often posting press releases, media coverage, and updates about new legislation and information. The organization posts responses and reactions to important legislation and efforts towards the fight against human trafficking.

Polaris Project has been widely recognized as a valued and powerful organization. In 2005, President Bill Clinton presented Katherine Chon, co-founder of Polaris Project, with the Do Something Brick Award.

IV. Building Coalitions

In 2007, Polaris Project joined as a founding member of a group launched by Humanity United called the Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking (ATEST). This

alliance aims to strengthen United States legislation and resources to fight trafficking.¹⁰

ATEST explains,

“By collaborating with each other, peers in the movement, survivors of slavery and trafficking, policymakers, like-minded activists, and business and thought leaders, we seek opportunities to create positive and enduring change—including building the fundamental legal, corporate, and cultural standards that will end modern-day slavery and human trafficking in all of its forms.”¹¹

By joining this alliance, Polaris Project is able to work with others to spread their message and programs on an international level. Polaris Project has also been able to build coalitions and relationships with international human rights and human trafficking organizations like the International Justice Mission, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-International (CATW), Free the Slaves, Vital Voices, American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations Solidarity Center, and International Office of Migration.¹² By building relationships with other NGOs, and political institutions, Polaris Project has increased their impact worldwide and created a united front against the problem of human trafficking.

V. Conclusions on Effectiveness

Polaris Project is an organization that has had great success in lobbying the United States Government to promote the fight against human trafficking and slavery. This strategy for promoting their motives has worked toward their goals by helping to pass new legislation and showing the members of Congress the importance of this

¹⁰ “Polaris Project Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking” accessed on 13 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/about-us/10-years-of-impact>

¹¹ “Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking—About ATEST” accessed 14 October 2012, <http://endslaveryandtrafficking.org/about>

¹² “Polaris Project International Policy” accessed 14 October 2012, <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/international-policy>

issue. In this way, Polaris Project's campaign has been very successful. In addition, the campaign has been very effective in building relationships with other organizations with similar goals nationally and internationally. While the organization has seen success from its campaign strategies of shamming and framing the issue of human trafficking, by showing more of the dangers and evils of slavery and trafficking and creating a villain in those criminals who partake in trafficking, they may gain greater support and the victims may gain more empathy from the community. Finally, while the organization has been successful in monitoring and reporting on the issues, there is always room for improvement in the fast-paced and constantly changing world of communications. Ultimately, by lobbying the government, Polaris Project is approaching its main goals in a logical sense—moving the government toward the idea that human rights is a pressing and prominent issue in society that needs immediate and meaningful attention; however, other strategies should be better employed for the organization to have full effectiveness on society.

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