Los Angeles County Sheriff Jim McDonnell participated today in the national launch of the “No Such Thing As A Child Prostitute” campaign. This initiative addresses the deeply troubling commercialization of child rape and advocates for changes in how law enforcement interacts with at risk young victims. In connection with this event, Sheriff McDonnell sent the following message this week to all 18,000-plus LASD personnel:

As law enforcement professionals, effective and appropriate communication is critical in our day to day interaction with the communities we serve. Perceptions can often result from the language we use. The use of inappropriate terminology, whether intentional or inadvertent, can foster distrust, anger, and resentment, and can also harm those whom we are committed to protect. We must be particularly sensitive to these concerns -- and how individuals are “labeled” -- when dealing with young victims of sex trafficking.

We know that the average age of a teen bought and sold for sex by traffickers and child molesters is between 12 and 14 years old. With the benefit of a recent $1.5 million federal grant, our Department will be building out a regional task force that will enable us to enhance efforts to combat human trafficking and the exploitation of young people in our community. Working with state, local and federal partners, we will not simply seek to dismantle criminal enterprises and bring to justice traffickers as well as individuals who create the demand that sustains these crimes, but we will also develop new approaches aimed at rescuing young victims and addressing their needs in a victim-centered way.

As all of us engage in this work, we must recognize the importance of law enforcement’s clear communication regarding who these victims truly are -- they are child victims and survivors of rape. Portraying these vulnerable children as anything else fails to acknowledge the trauma and victimization they have endured and serves to cloud the role of the criminally involved offenders. While at times some have used the terms “child prostitute” or “underage prostitution” to describe victims of child rape, children cannot consent to sex. With this starting point in mind, I ask you all not simply to eliminate any use of these inappropriate terms, but also to encourage others to avoid this labeling of young victims.

Thank you for joining me in the important fight against child sex trafficking in Los Angeles County and for advancing the compassionate attention and assistance we all seek to promote for the most vulnerable members of our community.