



**Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) Performance Oversight Hearing  
February 13, 2017**

The Amara Legal Center (“Amara”) provides free legal services to victims of sex trafficking (“victims”) and those harmed while involved in commercial sex in all of D.C.’s 8 wards, with the majority of our clients coming from wards 6, 7, and 8. Since our founding in 2013, Amara has provided free legal services to over 260 clients. D.C. has a particularly acute need for legal services for individuals harmed through involvement in commercial sex. Amara estimates that every year roughly 500 individuals seek services due to their victimization through sex trafficking in D.C.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, victims were sold by a trafficker into commercial sex who induced them to perform sex acts by force, fraud, or coercion. The FBI identified D.C. as one of 14 cities in the U.S. with the highest incidence of commercial sexual exploitation of children.<sup>2</sup> The National Human Trafficking Resource Center notes that because of D.C.’s location near major highways and Baltimore’s proximity, D.C. is a “significant part of East Coast sex trafficking circuits.”<sup>3</sup> They also state that phone calls placed for help were made at a rate that was the 16th highest in the nation, despite the population of D.C. being far lower than the average U.S. state. The actual number of survivors in D.C. is likely much higher than statistics show, as the majority of survivors remain hidden from the public and do not seek legal or social services.<sup>4</sup> Although many believe that sex trafficking only occurs overseas or among foreign nationals, the vast majority of Amara’s clients are U.S. citizens who were born and raised in the D.C. metro area.

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<sup>1</sup> Figure comes from a survey Amara conducted with local anti-trafficking organizations in D.C. in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Swecker, “June 7, 2005 Testimony: Exploiting Americans on American Soil: Domestic Trafficking Exposed,” Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/documents/UCSE\\_FINAL\\_VERSION\\_\(2\\_28\\_14\).pdf](https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/documents/UCSE_FINAL_VERSION_(2_28_14).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See Heather Clawson, PhD, et. al., “Human Trafficking Into and Within the United States: A Review of the Literature,” Department of Health and Human Services.



The specific legal needs of this population are great. Amara provides legal advice, partial representation, and full representation for the following types of civil legal issues: civil protection orders, divorce, child custody and support, name changes, living wills, and power of attorney cases. In addition to civil legal services, Amara also provides victim-witness advocacy services and representation in criminal record sealing cases.

Without access to free legal help, our clients also have a difficult time seeking employment, housing, educational opportunities or reunification with their families. For a victim of sex trafficking without access to a free lawyer, her very basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are absolutely out of reach. Though with a highly trained, trauma-informed, and dedicated Amara attorney by her side, a victim can live a whole and fulfilling life. Amara exists to stop the civil and human rights abuses suffered by victims of sex trafficking, using the law as a tool to advocate for the rights of its clients.

At Amara, we represent survivors as they navigate grueling and complex legal battles. One such survivor is Mia.<sup>5</sup> Mia was first trafficked when she was 13, and spent years being ferried between multiple traffickers. One night, at the age of 17, Mia was finally able to break free from her pimp and seek help from the local police. She was able to escape for good, and has been building a new life for herself for several years now. Her past victimization, however, continues to haunt her. One of her former pimps, Leon, is also the father of her child. Leon regularly stalked and harassed Mia by sending her death threats and appearing at her home.

Mia obtained a civil protection order against Leon, but grew terrified as the order's expiration loomed near. We successfully represented Mia in her fight to get the civil protection

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<sup>5</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy.

order extended. Mia now has continued legal protection from Leon, which allows her to resume building a new life.

Amara receives 16% of its annual budget from OVSJG. The funding from OVSJG has been crucial in addressing these issues, allowing Amara to provide services to individuals who have not previously had access to legal services. Because victims have been subjected to extreme physical and emotional abuse, it is important that attorneys serving them are trained in trauma-informed care so that they are able to understand, recognize, and respond effectively to the trauma clients have experienced. OVSJG funding has provided this population with trauma-informed care, ensuring effective communication with clients and empowers clients to make the choices that are best for their unique legal issues. Since May, 2015, Amara has been funded by OVSJG to aid in the creation of the Victim Legal Network of D.C., or VLNDC. The VLNDC will become a one-stop referral source for all victims of crime in the District. Amara has been an integral part in the creation of this referral network. Once launched, all victims of crime in D.C. will be able to access free referrals to a wide range of legal services. This network would not be possible without OVSJG funding.

Additionally, OVSJG funding has allowed us to begin work on the development of a diversion program that would bypass the damaging effect of a criminal record for prostitution and instead connect individuals with the social services they need to begin the recovery process. According to the Center for Health and Justice, “In its most general usage, diversion means that an individual is placed on a justice track that is less restrictive and affords more opportunities for rehabilitation and restoration. In its most pure form, diversion may result in the avoidance or dropping of a charge and dismissal of a case completely. At either end of the diversion spectrum,



the overriding goals are the same – to maximize the opportunity for success and minimize the likelihood of recidivism.”<sup>6</sup> Leaders of the DOJ’s Human Trafficking Task Force have indicated that prosecutors in D.C. create agreements that allow individuals charged with prostitution to perform community service in lieu of a conviction, but there is no effort to connect the individuals with the social services that would help them recover from the trauma they have experienced, find jobs, and avoid future criminal charges. Even non-convictions on a criminal record can decrease access to employment, housing, and education; the court system does not have a centralized effort to assist individuals charged with prostitution but not convicted in sealing their non-convictions. OVSJG allows Amara to address these issues as well as provide full record sealing services to individuals with prostitution charges who have had their cases dismissed.

We ask that the DC Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role OVSJG plays in funding of core services for human trafficking survivors, particularly at a time when we are seeing an increase in survivors seeking help. We ask that the DC Council and the Administration continue to support efforts to reach culturally specific, marginalized, or underrepresented populations, so that all survivors can heal and rebuild their lives. We’re excited to work with Chairman Allen and his staff and support survivors of human trafficking. We are available at any time to answer any questions the committee may have.

Respectfully,

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/sites/www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/files/publications/CHJ%20Division%20Report\\_web.pdf](http://www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/sites/www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/files/publications/CHJ%20Division%20Report_web.pdf)