



Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) Performance Oversight Hearing

February 27, 2020

The Amara Legal Center (“Amara”) provides free legal services to anyone involved in commercial sex work - whether that involvement is through choice, coercion, or circumstance. Our clients are sex workers and sex trafficking survivors. The majority of our DC clients are residents from wards 6, 7, and 8, and are U.S. citizens born and raised in the D.C. metro area. Since our founding in 2013, Amara has provided free legal services to almost 500 clients in the DC metropolitan area.

Due to its location on the I-95 corridor and proximity to casinos and sports stadiums, D.C. has an 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.¹ The FBI identified D.C. as one of 14 cities in the U.S. with the highest incidence of commercial sexual exploitation of children.² The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) 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.”³ Despite the population of D.C. being far lower than the average U.S. state, NHTRC states that phone calls placed for help were made at a rate that was the 16th highest in the nation. 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.⁴

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

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

³ [https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/documents/UCSE_FINAL_VERSION_\(2_28_14\).pdf](https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/documents/UCSE_FINAL_VERSION_(2_28_14).pdf)

⁴ 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.a

In 2018, DC ranked 34th among 55 states and territories for the number of calls made and human trafficking cases reported to the Human Trafficking Hotline.⁵ Between 2007 and 2016, DC ranked 4th in the 100 most populous US cities in number of calls and cases.⁶ Thirty-four cases have been reported in DC this year alone, and the hotline received 84 contacts.⁷ In 2018, the Hotline received 84 cases and 236 contacts.⁸ In 2017, the Metropolitan Police Department's (MPD) Human Trafficking Unit received and investigated 224 complaints of human trafficking and made a total of 216 arrests. The majority of arrests were for prostitution-related offenses.⁹ In that same time, MPD's Youth and Family Services Division reported and investigated 93 allegations of child sex trafficking, resulting in the arrest of six individuals in four confirmed cases of human trafficking.¹⁰ Community based organizations reported serving almost 200 individuals. The actual number of survivors in DC is likely much higher than statistics show, as the majority of survivors do not seek legal or social services.¹¹

In addition to providing legal services to victims of human trafficking, Amara is committed to providing legal services to those involved in commercial sex by choice or circumstance. The number of people who trade for sex is difficult to estimate and more resources should be allocated to research and obtain data for this population of DC residents. People who trade for sex are often victims of crime due to the vulnerability of working outside the boundaries of current laws. As a result, studies have shown that 80% of street-based sex workers

⁵ <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/states>

⁶ <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/100%20Most%20Populous%20Cities%20Report.pdf>

⁷ <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/state/district-columbia>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. (2019) Report on Human Trafficking in the District of Columbia CY 2017. <https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/Human%20Trafficking%20in%20the%20District%20of%20Columbia%20-%20CY%202017.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ 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

have experienced an act of violence.¹² Trans, Black, and Latina women are the most affected. In DC, the majority of trans women are Black or Latina, and trans women of color are more likely to engage in sex work.¹³ Of those surveyed in the DC's Trans Coalition Need Assessment, more than half of trans women of color had engaged in sex work in comparison to 12% of their White counterparts.¹⁴ Due to the racial and gendered implication of violence against sex workers, Amara seeks to provide services specifically targeting this population and continues to be the only legal service provider doing so.

The specific legal needs of this population are great. Amara provides legal advice, partial representation, full representation, and referrals. Amara assists with civil legal issues: civil protection orders, divorce, child custody and support, and name changes.. 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. However, with a highly trained, trauma-informed, and dedicated Amara attorney; our clients have the ability to stop the civil and human rights abuses suffered, using the law as a tool to advocate for their rights.

Our clients face complex legal battles, often having two, three, or more legal needs at the same time. One client example is Jane who is sixteen years old. At age thirteen, her mother began selling Jane to various men to obtain money to buy heroin, her drug of choice. Sometimes Jane's mother sold Jane to drug dealers in exchange for heroin. Now, three years later, while

¹² Raphael, J. and Shapiro, D. (2002, August). Sisters speak out: The lives and needs of prostituted women in Chicago. Center for Impact Research, 1-35 "80% of women in street prostitution had been threatened with a weapon at least once"// <https://www.decrimnow.org/why-decriminalize-sex-work>: "80% of street-based sex workers have experienced physical/sexual assault on the job."

¹³DC's Trans Coalition Need Assessment (Assessment)

¹⁴ <https://dctranscoalition.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/dctc-access-denied-final.pdf>



Jane is living with her foster mother, Jane is the mother of a nine-month old. Her child's father, John, is twenty nine years old. He met Jane when she was fifteen. Prior to Jane, he impregnated another teen, who was sixteen at the time. In addition to being a sexual predator, John arranged and facilitated "dates" between other teens and their clients. Jane, like many of our clients presents with multiple legal needs. We represented her in victim-witness advocacy as we liaised between her, the U.S. Attorney's Office, and detectives. We provided victim advocacy as we researched why her rape case was dropped. We assisted Jane in obtaining a civil protective order against John, and we represented her in a custody case against John.

The Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) is Amara's largest grant funder aside from the Department of Justice, currently providing over 20% of Amara's grant funds. Since May 2015, the funding from OVSJG has been crucial in addressing the above-referenced legal 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 empowering clients to make the choices that are best for their unique legal issues.

We are grateful and commend the leadership provided by Michelle Garcia and Cheryl Bozarth. In the last year, we have seen a continued focus on providing victims access to the full continuum of care as is demonstrated through OVSJG's Request for Proposals for grant funding, their work around providing trauma healing in the community through the Give An Hour -

Enhancing the District's Response to Trauma, and fostering further collaboration among grantees. Both the Director and Deputy Director understand the complexities of victims of crime: the fact that victims may have criminal records, victims may not want to pursue criminal cases, that victims are sometimes charged when in fact they are victims, that sometimes people commit crimes such as prostitution due to survival needs, and that we should not judge victims of crime for the decisions they make. Last Spring, Cheryl Bozarth took part in site visits as she became acquainted with the dozens of OVSJG grantees. During Amara's site visit, Ms. Bozarth introduced me to the phrase "victim-defendant" to refer to individuals who are charged criminally when they are in fact the victims of crime. Often our clients are charged and this phrase perfectly describes their experience. I was grateful for the introduction to this term and the perspective that Ms. Bozarth brings to OVSJG.

In addition to the inclusive and trauma-informed approach OVSJG takes, OVSJG continues to support victim service providers through the oversight of the DC Victims Assistance Network (DCVAN). Though the VAN is led by victim service providers, the VAN is hosted and supported through OVSJG and specifically through Lashonde Beasley who reserves meeting spaces, provides updates and training opportunities, and arranges the logistics for each meeting. The VAN allows service providers to collaborate, remain updated on the events and services by other providers, and supplement our services to provide access to the full continuum of care. Last year, OVSJG offered several training opportunities including a two day Trauma Training Institute on working with victims experiencing complex trauma and providing trauma-informed approaches; Promoting Your Own Resiliency - to support our self-care as we experience



vicarious trauma; and trainings through the DC VAN around outreach, organizational self-care, and restorative justice.

Last, I wanted to highlight two opportunities that were supported through OVSJG. OVSJG provided grants for service providers to receive specific trauma-training for their staff to support their unique client population. We took advantage of this resource and received a two day training with renowned trauma counselor Bonnie Martin. The second opportunity provided through our grant funding was having consultants assist us in capacity building. OVSJG understands that organizations need to continue to grow and improve their service provision through strategic thinking and planning. Last year, we were able to receive funding for a consultant to facilitate a staff retreat, a consultant to assist us with determining whether to engage in street outreach, and a consultant to provide a cultural-competency training.

We ask that the DC Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role OVSJG plays in funding of core services for those involved in commercial sex. 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 are available at any time to answer any questions the committee may have.

Respectfully,

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