



**To: Chairman Allen, Committee On the Judiciary & Public Safety Budget Hearings**

**From: Carole Bernard, Executive Director**

**Re: Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) Budget**

**Date: June 11, 2021**

The Amara Legal Center (“Amara”) provides free, high-quality, trauma-informed holistic legal services in the D.C. Metropolitan area to anyone involved in commercial sex work whether that involvement is by choice, coercion, circumstance or necessity. Our clients are sex trafficking survivors and sex workers who are marginalized in society and face complex legal issues.

Amara is the only legal service provider in the District of Columbia whose sole mission is to serve this population. Since its founding in 2013, Amara has provided free legal services to over 500 clients in the DC-metropolitan area. Amara employs a culturally-specific, trauma-informed, multidisciplinary approach to legal advocacy. Toward that goal, we provide full representation, limited scope representation and legal advice in the following matters: criminal defense, civil protection orders, divorce, child custody, child support, victim-witness advocacy, criminal record sealing, name change, gender marking changes, expungement and vacatur of criminal records.

Amara’s clients present with histories that include physical and mental neglect and devaluation that has negatively impacted every facet of their lives. As a result, our clients all too often face legal situations that unjustly prevent them from leading lives free of oppression. In the best of situations, navigating the legal system can be challenging but this is especially true for individuals who have experienced trauma. Without access to the free legal assistance that Amara and other stakeholders provide, our clients would be further marginalized by barriers to



employment, housing, higher education, job training and the opportunity to strengthen and reunify their families. These are systemic issues that can only be addressed through trauma-informed legal assistance.

Due to its unique geographic location on the I-95 corridor and close proximity to a number of casinos and professional sports venues, D.C. is a magnet for sex trafficking. Amara estimates that, annually, roughly 500 individuals seek services due to victimization and harm sex caused by sex trafficking and the commercial industry. However, since most individuals in our client population do not self-identify as victims and do not seek legal, social service or mental health assistance, we can conclude that the actual number of individuals who are in need of our assistance is significantly higher. Undoubtedly, this pervasive lack of access to information and justice has an ongoing, deleterious ripple effect on our entire client population—and particularly on our youth.

Alarmingly, the FBI identified D.C. as one of 14 cities in the United States with the highest incidents of commercial sexual exploitation of children and, we should mention that, “Black girls, compared to their racial counterparts, are more likely to be trafficked at a younger age. According to the FBI, 57.5% of all juvenile prostitution arrests are Black children.”<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Amara’s D.C. clients are Black Americans who reside in Wards 6, 7 and 8— U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>



citizens who were born and raised in the D.C. Metropolitan area. Given our client demographics, the startling FBI statistics must be recognized and addressed through zealous, high quality, trauma-informed holistic legal services and policy advocacy that Amara attorneys are well-equipped to provide. The Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants' (OVSJG) funding has made our services possible since 2015 and continued funding for OVSJG is a critical factor in our efforts.

OVSJG is Amara's largest grant funder aside from the Department of Justice and currently provides over 30% of Amara's grant funds. This funding has allowed Amara to reach and provide services to individuals who previously had zero information about, or access to, legal services. Accordingly, OVSJG funding has made it possible for Amara to address the multitude of legal barriers that our clients face by educating and empowering them to make informed choices that are often unique to their individual circumstances, histories and legal issues.

OVSJG funding also has allowed Amara to reach and provide services to more youth in D.C. through our partnerships with Courtney's House, and the Neighborhood Legal Services Program at DC Public Schools—including Roosevelt Senior High School and Anacostia High School—and our partnerships with other youth-serving community-based organizations in D.C. We also have been able to provide numerous trauma-informed trainings to social service providers and other professionals to help them identify survivors of sex trafficking and to create



a pipeline for referrals and to ensure they receive the continuum of care. With continued funding, we seek to expand our trauma-informed trainings to law enforcement and medical professionals.

Notably, many of our clients need transportation assistance. That is, clients need help paying the costs of traveling to court, social services agencies and mental and physical health appointments when those services are located across D.C. and not easily accessible by public transportation. For example, Amara represented a young mother who was a victim-defendant in a criminal matter. We assisted this client in obtaining physical custody of her one-year old daughter. The child's father is the client's physically abusive former partner. The client, with her former partner's consent, left her daughter in the care of a family member while she secured housing. However, after the client secured housing, the family member refused to return the child to the client.<sup>2</sup> Upon intake and assessment of the client's case, we determined that the family member did not have legal custody of the child. We were able to reunite the client with her child. The remaining matter stems from an incident that occurred as a result of the client's sex trafficking victimization. On several occasions throughout our representation, Amara has assisted this client with transportation costs to travel to and from court as well as other related appointments. The transportation assistance was, in part, supported by OVSJG grant funding.

Additionally, whether by choice or necessity, individuals who trade sex are often victims of

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<sup>2</sup> Some details were changed to preserve anonymity.



crime. However, the actual number of D.C. residents who trade sex is difficult to estimate and more resources are needed to research and obtain data for this silent population. Studies have shown that approximately 80% of street-based sex workers have experienced an act of violence—and Trans, Black, and Latina women are the most affected. In D.C., the majority of trans women are Black or Latina and trans women of color are more likely to engage in sex work. 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. OVSJG funding has also allowed us to advocate for the development of a pretrial diversion program that works to bypass the damaging effects that a criminal record for prostitution can have on our clients by connecting them with mental health professionals and social service agencies.

We note that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created economic circumstances that have resulted in an increased need for our services. The economic impact of business closures and lack of work are creating more opportunities for harm. Financial need is a common motivator in familial trafficking. Further, online home schooling has dramatically increased the amount of time that children are spending online and has resulted in increased risk of harm and exploitation as children are being recruited into pornography and other sexual acts for money. Sex workers are unable to work and when they do, they are exposed to increased health harms. Sex workers are turning to subscription sites like Only Fans to meet basic needs. Unfortunately,



traffickers are using similar platforms to continue to exploit victims. For many, these subscription sites will result in a need for victim-witness advocacy as cyber sexual violence increases. We have several cases where we provide advocacy to remove unconsented-to-videos from explicit video platforms.

We are advocating for \$85,544,909 million in the FY 22 budget for OVSJG. We celebrate this 47% increase in funding from the FY 21 budget and to the assistance it can provide to helping victims of crime across the District. Amara also greatly supports the Mayor's proposed budget increase of \$2,130,748 for OVSJG Local funds which will help in meeting the demand for trauma-informed services to assist all District victims--especially individuals who have been harmed through their involvement in the commercial sex industry whether by force, coercion, necessity or choice. These funds are necessary to develop referral systems, upgrade technology, direct service costs, outreach/training expenses, assist clients with transportation costs, capacity building expenses and staff development. This funding will support efforts to reach culturally-specific, marginalized and underrepresented populations so that all survivors will have an opportunity to prevent, address and eliminate disparate barriers that work to deny them the right and fair chance to heal and rebuild their lives. Especially during these trying times, it is important for the District to support civil legal services that serve primarily communities of color.



We are grateful for and commend the leadership provided by Michelle Garcia and Cheryl Bozarth and we ask the D.C. Council and the Administration to continue to support OVSJG's critical role in funding core services for those who are harmed through their involvement in commercial sex.

As always, we are pleased to work with Chairman Allen and his staff in this effort and are available to answer any questions that the committee may have.