



To: Prince George's County Council
From: Carole Bernard, Executive Director, Amara Legal Center
Re: Prince George's County Budget Fiscal Year 2022 and Police Reform
Date: May 4, 2021

Introduction

The Amara Legal Center ("Amara") provides free, trauma-informed legal representation, access to support services, and advocacy for a more equitable legal system for individuals impacted by sex trafficking or involved in sex work in the D.C. metropolitan area. Accordingly, our clients are sex trafficking survivors and sex workers. Since its founding in 2013, Amara has served over 500 clients. The vast majority of Amara's clients are U.S. citizens, born and raised in the D.C. metropolitan area. Amara's practice areas include family law, civil protection orders, name changes, criminal defense, criminal record relief, and victim-witness advocacy for clients working with law enforcement. Amara partners with agencies in Prince George's County to identify and serve trafficking survivors and sex workers. Amara's partners include the Prince George's County Human Trafficking Task Force, the Family Justice Center, the Bridge Center at Adam's House, and the Latin American Youth Center. Amara also participates in the State's Attorney's Alternative Resolution Diversion Program.¹ Amara provides legal orientations to individuals who participate in the Diversion Program and screens participants for trafficking and related legal services.

Sex Trafficking in Prince George's County

Due to its location along the I-95 corridor and its proximity to major cities, Prince George's County has seen a significant number of sex trafficking cases within its borders. Sex trafficking in the county frequently occurs through online recruitment and advertisements. Traffickers mask their identities, for instance by posing as recruiters for modeling agencies or by initiating romantic relationships. Upon gaining the victim's trust, the trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to induce him or her to engage in commercial sex. Traffickers post advertisements online and set up meetings with buyers. These meetings are often scheduled at hotels throughout the county, especially along Route 1. As a result, Prince George's County has become a hub for trafficking, as traffickers from within Prince George's County and from the larger DC Metropolitan area utilize the county's location to their advantage.

Call for Police Reform

While Prince George's County has made efforts to address trafficking, for instance through the Diversion Program, there is a substantial need for trauma-informed policing and police reform. Due to the traumatic and complex nature of trafficking, survivors often do not immediately self-identify as being trafficked. As a result, survivors are often arrested for prostitution and other low-level offenses in which they would not have otherwise been involved.

¹ The Diversion Program gives individuals charged with prostitution the opportunity to resolve their criminal case through the Stet docket under the condition that they engage in services with an approved service provider and obey all laws.



Unfortunately, law enforcement’s failure to identify survivors and connect them with service providers results in the retraumatization of survivors as they are treated as criminals instead of victims in the legal system. Survivors regularly express fear of calling the police for help because they are not believed, they are viewed as criminals, or they face harassment from officers. To resolve this issue, Amara Legal Center proposes two actions:

1) Instituting a multi-disciplinary investigatory team for trafficking cases. To reduce trafficking and support survivors, law enforcement should focus on investigating and arresting the traffickers, as opposed to survivors and buyers. A multi-disciplinary team involving not only law enforcement and prosecutors, but also social workers and service providers, will provide a more holistic approach to addressing trafficking and will increase survivors’ comfort levels in reporting and pursuing trafficking investigations.

2) Engage local service providers to develop a comprehensive training program on trauma-informed and community-based policing. Prince George’s County has a wealth of service providers that work directly with trafficking survivors. By drawing upon service provider expertise regarding clients’ needs and experiences, the police department can implement more effective and survivor-centered practices.

The Intersection of Race, Trafficking, and Police Practices

The Amara Legal Center would like to highlight that race is a critical factor in discussing police misconduct, especially in the context of sex workers and sex trafficking survivors. In addition to the well-documented incidents of police violence against people of color throughout our nation, our client population consists primarily of Black and Latinx cis and trans women, a historically marginalized and disenfranchised group. It should not go without 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.”² Traffickers specifically target individuals based on perceived vulnerabilities, such as financial instability, homelessness, or addiction. As a result of deep-rooted and long-lasting systemic racism, Black and Latinx communities are more likely to fall within the marginalized populations that traffickers target. Considering the racial demographics of Prince George’s County,³ it is critical to address trafficking and over-criminalization of minority groups within the county.

We are advocating for funding to create a multi-disciplinary team to investigate trafficking cases in the county. We are also advocating for funding to develop a comprehensive trauma-informed police training program designed by victim service providers. These programs are necessary to appropriately address trafficking and support survivors in Prince George’s County. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Prince George’s County new Police Chief Malik Aziz to further discuss these new programs. We also are pleased to work with the County Council in this effort and are available to answer any questions.

² <https://www.cbefinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

³ According to the 2010 census, 64.4% of the population of Prince George’s County identified as Black or African-American and 19.5% identified as Hispanic or Latino.