



**Legislative and Judicial Subcommittee
August 11, 2022 - Meeting Recap**

Members Present Virtual: Chair Charles Klug, Chief Judge Ronald Ficarrotta, Major Ruhl, Deborah Laskowski, Rocky Brancato (for Public Defender Holt) Connie Rose, Judge Bauman, Dottie Groover-Skipper, Jenny Higgins, Commissioner Kimberly Overman (arrived at 2:44pm), School Board Member Perez (arrived at 2:50pm)

Members Absent: Angie Martinez, Brent Woody, Jennifer Glaister, Laura Henderson, Robert Rancourt, Courtney Derry

Staff: Lisa J. Montelione, Government Relations & Strategic Services
Nada Haddad, Legislative Aide – Office of Commissioner Overman

Guest(s): none

Chair Klug called the meeting to order at 2:33pm asking Mr. Brancato to kick off the meeting.

Mr. Brancato discussed the statistics gathered by the Public Defender's (PD's) office on those suspected and charged (as adults) human trafficking providing rough numbers providing a starting point for discussion. He noted that the reports had been scrubbed of personal information and that the PD's reported statistics will never be a complete picture because some individuals (adults and juveniles) are represented by private counsel and do not interact with the PD's office. Further, juvenile cases may only be known if a social worker reached out because under the juvenile program, they wouldn't all be indexed (i.e., because of the Walker Plan (a type of plea deal that involves community service) and in cases where adjudication was withheld, or a judicial warning was given. Mr. Brancato noted that he would try to provide a report that is a bit more "presentation" ready with some clarifying details.

Mr. Brancato continued that the Department of Juvenile Justice, has indicators on the "dry form" that comes in at the risk assessment stage. He also said that PD attorneys have been trained to look for signs and so their office can get to the population where treatment would be successful and make it therapeutic versus punitive. PD's have had a difficult time when working with someone they know is being trafficked but is not open to receiving assistance or committing to treatment. He reminded the subcommittee that there are people who act of their own volition.

Judge Bauman stated that he recently gave a presentation which showed that between 2019 and early 2022 11,108 arrests made involved prostitution and ancillary cases (theft, selling/buying drugs etc.). The national hotline data he saw said Tampa is number 12, near the top of American cities per capita in human trafficking. He stated that Law Enforcement is working Selah Freedom for adults and his office is alerted right away to juveniles being investigated or when sting operation is planned. He estimates that only 20% of the victims are coming through the courts, meaning 80% of reporting comes through the community.

Judge Bauman continued that there are red flags in documentation received from law enforcement, from CPI's and from predisposition reports, which may be subjective in the identification of the signs. Fighting on two fronts we must by engage law enforcement on the front end and then be careful of what's coming through courtrooms on the back end. Identification of survivors and victims was discussed in-depth.

Mr. Brancato reported that their office addresses this during intake, with those performing that work receiving training, which was very helpful.

The participants agreed that training is key to identification and that it is the most important tool for all agencies involved when interacting with the population. A screening tool that everyone utilizes would have to be customized to be effective for the various partners eventually expanding to include medical first responders and doctors.

The participants continued with a discussion of the Code Blue pilot program in Baltimore which ties hospitals tied to law enforcement. When a victim's identified, a staff person with the hospital is contacted, taking the victim to an isolated location. They take the victim's phone so the trafficker cannot GPS where the victim is, and victims are given services



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immediately. They don't have a court, but they are identifying victims and rapidly assisting the victim.

School Board Member Perez reported that it is their school social workers that identify possible victim through conversations with teachers and staff. She continued that a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker will make a referral or report. Their first priority is the safety of the student. She is concerned about services available to them and how to continue provided a safe space and the sustainability of those services, especially when their parents don't support them. Provision of mental health services and treatment is difficult in many situations. Many suffer from PTSD and may have triggers throughout their lifetimes.

Ms. Groover-Skipper mentioned requesting reports from the PD's office several years ago for prostitution cases coming through the PD's office to see if an adult human trafficking court would be justified, as there is a natural link between prostitution. The numbers back then were quite high. She reiterated that they have been working for years to show that a specialty court was indeed warranted to help victims and survivors to get resources and reduce recidivism. Praising Judge Bauman's court, she highlighted the Veteran's Treatment court and others as models. In St. Petersburg, Judge Farnell has closed off her drug treatment court for the first hour or so to take drug cases that may be related to human trafficking. Using that model, it wouldn't be as expensive as creating a whole new court.

Chief Judge Ficarrotta emphasized relying on hard data and the need for gathering and analyzing data on cases coming through the court system by working with Law Enforcement, the State Attorney's office, the Court, the PD's office, and others to get a complete picture. He expressed his desire to focus on the most vulnerable. He cited that was the focus of the position funded by Hillsborough County that he is very grateful for, pointing out that not every prostitution case is going to be a human trafficking case, noting how challenging it is to categorize cases, emphasizing that he felt Law Enforcement was key to identification. He also expressed a desire for additional training for Judges.

Praising Judge Bauman's Options Court, the Chief Judge expressed his desire to have that court gain stability and develop a set of procedures and outcome insight. Suggesting once the juvenile aspect is working, the Courts can consider an adult pilot project, if deemed necessary. He would want to see the Options Court model develop into a system that provides quantifiable successful outcomes for survivors. Going through the court system is the last route, he noted that it is better to handle the individual needs though the community and the front lines, Law Enforcement, and the State Attorney's office with diversionary programs. Courts have very limited resources. Chief Judge Ficarrotta cited that they have over 400,000 cases pending in civil, criminal, and other courts and they are experiencing, as are others, hiring enough personnel, especially cases managers. He shared that he gets his priorities from the Florida Supreme Court, and they have expressed emphasis on civil jury trials and case resolution.

Commissioner Overman mentioned that most people don't want to identify themselves as victims making it even more challenging to gather very accurate numbers. It is important that screening tools are used consistently. She stated that she is aware that HCSO uses one, and one that the PD's office and courts use, but questioned whether they are uniform. COVID presented challenges, because the organizations who were visiting the jails weren't allowed in person visits, so those incarcerated were not receiving information on human trafficking or the available resources. The chance to self-identify was dashed during that time. The Commissioner inquired if there were the financial resources to support a specialty court and he related case management either by the court system or nonprofits.

Member Rose offered, from her perspective as a survivor, that wrap around services and safe spaces where they can talk are necessary to support survivors.

On the next steps and recommendations to the full COHT for action in September, Commissioner Overman stated that she would also like to solid goals and objectives. Perhaps a roadmap for a pilot program that can be used to apply for grant funding.

Chair Klug adjourned the meeting at 3:35 pm