

SLAVERY NO MORE 2012 GLOBAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING CONFERENCE

August 10-11 ~ LOS ANGELES, CA

Justice System Challenges & Opportunities

Jocelyn White: Last year I was able to attend a training of one of the first trainings that had been organized for probation officers to do their paradigm shift for acknowledging that they're not criminals. They're actually victims and what do they do when they encounter a victim of human trafficking? What's the best practices for placement? What's the best practices in the courtroom, and I had the privilege of hearing our next guest. What really rung true to me during the training was her dedication and her heart for all of the kids that have entered into her courtroom and how she was just so dedicated to making sure that in her area, she could provide the best services possible for them. I want to thank her for coming and here to discuss our justice system challenges and opportunities is Commissioner Catherine Pratt.

Catherine Pratt: Good afternoon. My name's Catherine Pratt. I'm a Commissioner for the Los Angeles Superior Court. Until recently, I sat in a juvenile delinquency court in Compton. Due to the budget problems in the court, that was recently moved to the Kenyon Juvenile Justice Center which is in the south central Watts area. Both of those areas are areas where we see a huge amount of teens who've been forced into prostitution.

When I first started as a commissioner in 2006, and got assigned to Compton, I was very excited. It was exactly where I wanted to be working. I expected to be working with people who were gang affiliated. I expected to be handling cases where there was a lot of violence. I did not expect to have dozens and dozens of girls who were involved in prostitution. For several years, I handled those cases like I handled all other cases. I tried to find the best thing for them. I found that it was nearly impossible. Because most of these kids do not have an appropriate home to return to, I would send them to a group home. They would immediately AWOL. I'd issue a bench warrant. They'd come back a few weeks later. I'd send them to a group home, and they would immediately AWOL and this was the cycle.

I realized that because of this cycle and this period of time between when they got arrested on the bench warrant and came to my court and got placed, they were spending a lot of time in juvenile hall. A week, two weeks, three weeks, and this was happening month after month after month. The bottom line was these girls were in reality spending a lot more time in custody than a lot of the violent criminals that I was working with. That evolved into being approached by several of the other people here today. Michelle Guymon from the Probation Department. Detective Turner from the Long Beach Police Department came to my court on a particular case with one young woman who by the way I don't know if you realize this Detective Turner, but my whole court room calls you Uncle Kenny now. The girls are very attached to them, because he develops a long standing relationship with them. He goes and visits them in their placements.

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About a year ago, we decided to apply for a grant from the state. The probation department did and the juvenile court did. We both received these grants, and the idea behind them was to provide enhanced services and enhanced supervision to these girls. We started doing this in January. So far we've had a lot of challenges. We've learned a lot of lessons. We've made a lot of mistakes, but I also think that we've really gotten through to many of these girls. Everyone wants us to come up with a best practices of what's best to do for them. We haven't gotten that yet.

I think the bottom line of what these girls need is a connection, a real connection with someone. That can come in a lot of different ways. For some, Kim Biddle who is here, she is an advocate with Saving Innocence. I appoint her to work with a lot of these girls to help them navigate the various governmental systems that they're involved with including if they have to testify against their trafficker which tends to be a very traumatic event for them. She's one of the connections that they make. We have a dedicated group of probation officers who are very well versed in this and work very, very hard and are available to these kids 24 seven. Michelle Guymon who's the Director of Placement and myself are getting calls and texts all day long about how any particular girl is doing and trying to get services out there to help them as best we can.

Right now we are very much in the beginning of this, but I feel very fortunate in that we have law enforcement and the probation department very enthusiastically supporting us in this. My hope is that in a year or two, we will have really set forth some protocols for how to handle these kids, so they don't rotate in and out of the juvenile halls the way that the girls that I first observed did. That's what we have been working on, and I think we're going to have a panel discussion on that some more. Thank you.

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