

## **May 9th NAHT Board Meeting Minutes**

**Present:** John Chesser, George Belitsos, Maggie Tinsman, Tom Barr, Alyse Hardin, Alka Khanolkar, Shirley Fineran, Lyna Debner, Deanna Jensen, Bernadette Rixner, Gretchen Brown-Waech

**Excused Absence:** Stephanie Olson, Kim Smith, Grace Lohse, Linda Harrell, Mike Tupper, Jessica Hagin

**Absent:**

**Guests:** Maddie Judas (Technology Consultant), Roxanne Riesberg (Health & Human Services), Chelsea Hoye (Advocacy Iowa), Threase Harms (Advocacy Iowa)

### **I. Call to order and attendance.**

Meeting was called to order at 2:31 pm. Chesser introduced a new meeting minutes taker, Madeline Judas. Belitsos then introduced guest speaker Roxanne Riesberg, from the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services.

### **II. Roxanne Riesberg, DHHS: 2022 HT statistics**

Riesberg began by discussing the different child abuse statistic pages located on the Department of Health and Human Service's website, along with how each individual statistic document is broken down by the different categories including report totals, type of allegations, type of abuse, outcome, county, etc.

Riesberg reported on the 2022 Human Trafficking Child assessment. During the 2022 year, the DHHS had 35,512 assessments, and 18% of those included 6,302 family assessments, and within those family assessments, 8,069 children were involved. The other 82% of those assessments were child abuse assessments with a total of 28,310.

Riesberg then reported on the assessments involving unique children, involving 1,815. Riesberg noted that the reason that number is so small is because there are only three different types of abuse that are eligible for the confirmed outcome.

Riesberg lastly reported on child abuse cases that resulted in a founded outcome made up 25% of all child abuse assessments and that was 7,010 assessments. This included 9,421 unique children. Of this total number of abused or neglected children, 46% of these children were five years of age or younger, 26% were from ages six to ten, and the remaining 28% were children older than 11 years old. Riesberg then noted how this information gets broken down into types of abuse, when abuse is founded, and the non-governmental social service organizations that also offer services.

Riesberg noted the average caseload for child protective workers is 62 cases per month, while case managers handle an average of 23 cases per month. Riesberg then noted the main goal is to pursue permanent placements and family connections for at-risk children, reduce racial disparities, and engage families in improvement plans. She also noted that family preservation services aim to prevent child removal and were successful in 8.29% of cases, and agency-based solution casework resulted in 91.44% of families safely maintaining their children at home or with caregivers.

Tinsman asked a question regarding if these were federal statistics or statistics from Iowa. Riesberg responded that this document is specific to Iowa only and that the top of the document includes federal statistics. She then stated that the numbers she would be reviewing now are specific reports that were made to the IDHHS for concerns of child sex trafficking and found sex trafficking cases over the past two years in Iowa. **Tinsman asked why there were only 21 confirmed cases related to sex trafficking in Iowa.** Riesberg responded by stating that she acknowledges that these numbers are low because sex trafficking in the community often goes unnoticed and despite conducting more assessments related to child sex trafficking, only 21 incidents have enough evidence to be substantiated. Riesberg then explained that the evidence level for child abuse, in general, is 51%, meaning there must be a preponderance of evidence for it to be confirmed, but unfortunately, only 21 incidents met this threshold.

Tinsman then asked a question regarding sexual assault vs. sex trafficking and why have a category regarding sexual assault when looking at sex trafficking. Riesberg responded stating that the IDHHS emphasizes that if a situation meets the criteria for both sexual abuse and child sex trafficking, their response as the Child Welfare Agency is to substantiate both forms of abuse. Riesberg then stated that the IDHHS' main responsibility is to assess whether or not abuse has occurred to children and to provide services when abuse is confirmed.

Barr asked if it is typical that 70% of the abuse assessments result in a finding of not confirmed, and, if it is, does that have any indicators on the reporting of the follow-up. Riesberg responded that the intake unit has a lower threshold and accepts allegations based on a reasonable belief of abuse, while assessments require a higher threshold of the preponderance of the evidence. She stated that sometimes there may not be enough evidence to confirm an allegation and that it is important to gather the necessary information for a substantiation.

Rixner asked what Riesberg meant by that these cases of sex trafficking are substantiated. Riesberg responded that when there is a substantiated case, formal case management services are necessary. Safety is prioritized, especially in trafficking cases, and the question of whether it's safe for the child to remain home is always considered

and in most cases, it is determined unsafe. Ongoing services are then provided including the need for court involvement Riesberg stated. Rixner asked another question regarding on if sex trafficking is the crime present, if they are waiting on the IDHHS to see how to handle the situation, or do the police pursue the accusation of sex trafficking. Riesberg responded by stating they are totally separate entities and that both departments work parallel to each other, on different sets of things during the investigation to determine the best possible way to solve the case.

Belitsos asked what the total number of child sex trafficking incidents reported for 2022 was. He noted that there were 230 incidents reported in 2021. Reisberg responded that she didn't have the ability to request that information for this meeting but will get that information to the Belitsos as soon as she can. Belitsos noted he will share that information with the board.

Riesberg ended her presentation by stating that even though the child trafficking data presented may be largely underreported, there are some positive trends. She stated that to address the issue of sex trafficking more effectively, it is crucial to encourage people to report incidents of human trafficking.

Hardin noted that as the director of a foster group care program at the time, she had to make some reports of trafficking and that once a new director came in, they might not have known what to look for when it comes to trafficking which is why reports might have been different during the years 2020 and 2021. Riesberg responded by saying that more awareness is needed and is slowly building so that people can provide evidence of these incidents.

### **III. Gretchen Brown-Waech, Iowa AG's office: AG's statistics since 2017**

Brown-Waech noted that the Iowa AG's office has had federal funding for the last three years and it is very interesting to see how the state has not necessarily supported the services at the level that is needed and this service funding is very important.

Belitsos asked if Waech added additional cases since the number of cases in 2021 jumped from 558 cases to 787. Waech responded stating she didn't know where that number came from but it must've been a math mistake.

Hardin noted that in Waech's recent email, there are 51 funded programs and agencies but there are only three that are human trafficking-specific programs across the state, and that emphasizes a need for increased funding in each and every legislative session. Waech noted that the mission is to help families and children involved in the violent crime of sex trafficking, and it is law enforcement's responsibility to identify child

sex trafficking.

Fineran noted that in a previous discussion it was mentioned that information comes from funded programs, but that there are also service providers who are not funded by the state. She further discussed how it is important to keep in mind that we need to figure out ways to obtain this information in order to capture actual statistics accurately and involve all relevant parties in the collection of data for statistics. Waech agreed and stated that in the future we need to have a separate database for services that are not funded to provide information for a more accurate representation of data.

#### **IV. Consent agenda items; April meeting minutes; April treasurer's report**

Chesser asked if there were any amendments to the April meeting minutes or the treasurer's report. There were none and Chesser moved to approve both the April meeting minutes and treasurer's report. Tinsman seconded it. **Both the minutes and treasurer's report were approved unanimously.**

#### **V. Legislative Committee update (Maggie, Chelsea, Threase). News on HT task force language in the budget and the fate of other trafficking-related bills.**

Tinsman and Hoye reported on the outcome of the 2023 Iowa Legislature. As you may recall, the 2023 legislation started with eight human trafficking bills. Of those bills, four human trafficking-related bills were approved and sent to the Governor. They began by reporting on the bill that increased penalties for traffickers.

[HF 630](#) increases the number of criminal penalties relating to the facilitation of human trafficking. The current Iowa code states many of these crimes are class D felonies, HF 630 would increase them to class B felonies, or class A felonies for the trafficking of children. The bill also states a person sentenced to a human trafficking crime is ineligible for deferred judgment or a suspended sentence. This bill was passed unanimously by members of the House and Senate, and the Governor signed the bill earlier today. The governor made the following statement about the bill: "Human trafficking is a vile form of modern-day slavery and in Iowa, we won't tolerate it. The bill signed today increases penalties for both labor and sex trafficking and criminals found guilty of trafficking children under 18 will serve up to life in prison."

Hoye and Tinsman reported that the Safe Harbor bill was approved at the last minute of the legislature. The Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking secured bill drafting for a Youth Safe Harbor Human Trafficking Task Force, [SF 545](#). This legislation provides for creating an interim, interdisciplinary group of state agencies tasked with identifying the

infrastructure necessary for implementing a Safe Harbor law in Iowa. The Iowa Senate passed the bill unanimously in mid-March but failed to be taken up by the House Judiciary Committee ahead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> legislative funnel deadline on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

Advocacy Iowa continued to have conversations with members of the House to find another vehicle for this legislation. With the help of Representatives Brian Lohse and Steve Holt, policy language forming a Child Human Trafficking Interim Study Committee was included in this year's Justice Systems Budget bill, [SF 562](#) – a major win! The bill was been passed by the House and Senate and now hits the Governor's desk soon. The Child Human Trafficking Interim Study Committee is tasked with:

- Identifying current initiatives to eliminate the human trafficking of minors;
- Identifying current services available in Iowa for minor victims of human trafficking;
- Identifying and investigating the laws of other states that focus on minor victims of human trafficking to determine if another state's model would be effective in Iowa;
- Research and recommend a model of rehabilitative services for minor victims of human trafficking;
- Identifying barriers that prevent minor victims of human trafficking from seeking legal assistance or medical attention;
- Creating a procedure to be followed by all law enforcement officers statewide if an officer encounters a minor who may be a victim of human trafficking;
- Investigating the efficacy of safe harbor laws;
- Investigating and identifying potential routes to eliminate human trafficking in Iowa;
- Making recommendations on trafficking-related training for law enforcement officers, court attorneys, and juvenile service officers; and
- Identifying funding needs based on recommendations made by the committee.

Unfortunately, the five million dollar increase in appropriations for service to survivors was not approved. The NAHT requested the Iowa Legislature allocate an additional \$5M in Justice System Appropriations for Victim Assistance Grants Budget in the Attorney General's Office, for a total of \$10M. NAHT also requested the legislature amend the specific language of the victim service budget line item to state that this money serves victims of "human trafficking, homicide, and other violent crimes." The current bill language states this allocation is given to those providing services to "crime victims of domestic abuse or to crime victims of rape and sexual assault." Unfortunately, this request was not funded.

Unfortunately, changes to mandatory restitution were not approved. As we saw watching Pieper Lewis' sentencing unfold, current law states all criminal cases in which an

offender is convicted of a felony and caused the death of another person, the court is required to order the offender to pay \$150,000 in restitution to the victim's estate or their heirs. Two bills, [SF 522](#) and [HF 594](#), seek to remedy this. SF 522 offers discretion to the court making the sentence, allowing the judge to consider any criminal offenses committed by the victim against the offender. HF 594 states the restitution requirement should not apply to an offender whose offense was directly related to the offender being a victim of human trafficking. NAHT supports excepting survivors of trafficking and other victims of violence and assault from the \$150k restitution law. Unfortunately, neither bill advanced for floor debate.

Other Trafficking-Related Legislations approved:

- [HF 176](#): A bill relating to continuous sexual abuse of a child and makes applicable penalties.
  - Passed the House & Senate unanimously. Signed by the Governor on April 28, 2023.
- [SF 84](#): A bill relating to the sexual exploitation of a minor and the corresponding penalties.
  - Passed the House & Senate unanimously. The Governor is expected to sign.

Fineran asked if Hoyer could send her some comments to send to representative Holt, and Hoyer responded saying absolutely. Belitsos asked in regards to reporting this in the blog post/newsletter if we call it the Safe Harbor task force or by a different name. Hoyer responded by saying to call the team the Human Trafficking Interim Study Committee. Hardin asked when they would get this team up and running and gather people together for the team. Harms responded stating they don't have a certain date at this very moment but her guess is August at the earliest or later. Tinsman, Barr, and Belitsos gave their compliments to Hoyer and Harms on getting the Safe Harbor Bill approved by the legislature.

## **VI. Research Committee Update (Stephanie)**

Chesser noted that Olson and her Set Me Free Project is having a retreat in July, during which the CDC representatives from Washington, DC are coming here to do a site visit. He noted that unfortunately, that's the exact same day as the Board meeting in July so me, Waech, and Olson will be at the retreat and might be postponing or canceling that Board meeting. Rixner noted that we could change the July meeting to August since we usually don't meet in August. Chesser responded saying that is perfect.

## **VII. Recap on the Pieper Lewis legal team presentation April 13 in Ames. (George)**

Since the Board was running short on time, Belitsos noted that the quickest summary he can give to the Board is what he wrote up in the May blog post. There is also a photo of the lead attorney for Pieper Lewis who made the address on the ISU campus. He noted that he sent the blog post/newsletter to the 1,500 subscribers on May 3rd and if the board hasn't read it, then to please do so.

**VIII. Request from Jerry Brimeyer and Susan Mitchell to use “snippets” of our hotel/motel video; July board meeting schedule conflict (John)**  
Moved to the next Board meeting.

**IX. Adjournment**

Meeting was adjourned at 3:57 pm. 8