

NAHT Board Meeting Minutes August 9, 2025

Present: George Belitsos, Shirley Fineran, Teresa Davidson, Karl Schilling, Lyna Debner, Maggie Tinsman, Heather Brown, Sara Kellums, John Chesser

Tom Barr, Bernadette Rixner

Excused absence: Stephanie Olson, Austin Stubbs, Brittany Sowder

Guest: Ray Fiedler (DPS Office to Combat Human Trafficking)

Task Force Development

Ray discussed the progress of the task force combating human trafficking, highlighting the involvement of 20-28 investigators from 20 agencies in Eastern and Central Iowa. He mentioned the success of recent operations, including the investigation of illicit massage businesses, and plans to expand efforts to western Iowa by October or November. The group discussed the need for additional legislation targeting massage parlors, with Maggie suggesting that more specific laws are required. Ray confirmed that massage therapy training facilities have been receptive to discussions about human trafficking, and he plans to continue these conversations in the future. Ray described the illicit massage business as a highly organized, profitable criminal enterprise linked to Chinese organized crime. He explained that while individual employees are often victims of trafficking, the business owners and operators are the targets of investigation. Ray mentioned various enforcement approaches, including fire inspections and building code checks, as well as the challenges of victim cooperation due to debt obligations and language barriers. Bernadette noted that legitimate businesses have expressed awareness of the issue, and the group discussed the potential use of T visas to help protect and retain victims' cooperation in investigations.

Hotel Certification and Trafficking Updates

Ray provided an update on hotel certification, noting that while the number of certified locations decreased from 740 to 605 and the number of certified individuals dropped from 24,000 to 16,000, this was partly due to system purges and account consolidations. Ray explained that the recertification process is ongoing, with some hotels being more responsive than others, and a new website has been created to streamline the process and manage private information separately.

Casino Employee Human Trafficking Training

Ray and George discussed the need for casino employees to be trained to recognize and report human trafficking, with Ray noting that such training is already required for casino employees at establishments with attached hotels in Iowa. George mentioned that Maggie's committee is considering adding a provision for casino employee training to a bill, which Ray supported for casinos not attached to hotels. Teresa confirmed that the training video remains available on stopthiowa.org, and Ray informed her that the

website's structure has changed but the information remains accessible.

Tip Line Performance and Collaboration

Ray reported that the tip line, launched in late January, has received around 24-25 tips, which is slightly better than expected and comparable to surrounding states. He noted that the information received has been valuable and the analysts have been effective in following up on tips. Ray also discussed the success of TV ads promoting the tip line, which had a high completion rate but stopped airing in July due to budget constraints. Bernadette inquired about the task force's collaboration with FBI and Homeland Security, to which Ray explained that these federal agencies work with state, local, and county agencies in Iowa but are not officially part of the task force. Ray shared an example of how the tip line led to the quick recovery of a missing girl in Des Moines, highlighting the effectiveness of the networking aspect of the task force.

2024 Trafficking Statistics and Training

George requested statistics for 2024 from Ray, who provided data on sex and labor trafficking tips, training numbers, and updates on current statistics. Ray confirmed that in 2023, there were approximately 90-92 tips for both sex and labor trafficking, and in 2024, he trained 2,235 individuals, with 1,345 trained so far in 2025. Ray agreed to send updated numbers to George and John for their report.

Operation Coast to Coast Launch

Ray discussed the upcoming nationwide Operation Coast to Coast project in October, which will be the final 16-hour session following previous training. He explained that participating agencies can choose their own projects, with a focus on investigations like hotel stings and IMB cases, and noted that Iowa will handle the intelligence portion.

Red Sand Project Awareness Initiative

The group discussed initiatives related to the Red Sand Project, which aims to raise awareness about human trafficking on World Day Against Trafficking on July 30th. Teresa shared that the project has been ongoing since 2018 and is coordinating efforts across Iowa to create a unified state response. Maggie reported on the successful launch of the local Red Sand Project at Leach Park in Bettendorf on January 8, 2025, which aimed to raise awareness about human trafficking, and mentioned an upcoming presentation at St. Ambrose University on January 8, 2026, to discuss human trafficking locally and globally. Lyna reported on an upcoming Red Sand event in Clear Lake at a larger event expected to attract 8,000 people, with media coverage already secured. The group also discussed the high cost of shipping red sand and considered alternatives like dyeing regular sand.

Human Trafficking Funding Allocation Concerns

The board discussed concerns about the \$150,000 in funding allocated for human trafficking survivors being diverted to existing domestic abuse and sexual assault programs rather than creating new programs as originally intended based on an email response received by John Chesser from John Gish of the AG's office. Heather suggested survivors would access this money by applying for individual funding through the Crime Victim Services Fund. The group discussed concerns about how state funding for human trafficking services was being allocated, with Heather and George confirming that while federal funding had been cut, Iowa had decided to use state money to support victim programs generally instead of creating a dedicated human trafficking grant program as originally intended. John agreed to follow up with John Gish to get more details about the actual allocation of the \$150,000, as the current approach of adding it to general victim reimbursement funds was not aligned with legislative intent. The group agreed that once they understood the exact distribution, they would need to send a letter from the Iowa network expressing their disappointment and emphasizing that this was not the intended use of the funds, as they had been working toward securing a million dollars for these services.

Treasurer Reports and Luncheon Fundraiser

The board reviewed and unanimously approved the June minutes on motion by Maggie and second by Shirley. George presented the June and July treasurer's reports, noting a disappointing income in June with only \$120 raised against \$6,615 in expenses, while July showed improved results with donations from board members Lyna, Kim, Karl, Tom and Teresa, as well as \$200 from the Tri-State Coalition. The board accepted both treasurer reports unanimously on motion by Tom and second by Shirley. Teresa announced an upcoming "Be the Voice" luncheon on September 5th at the Hilton in Johnston featuring Gage West, the Senior Adviser on Anti-Human Trafficking Efforts to the President.