

NAHT May 14th, 2024 Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Present: John Chesser, George Belitsos, Maggie Tinsman, Lyna Debner, Thomas Barr, Bernadette Rixner, Mike Tupper, Stephanie Olson, Linda Harell, Deanna Jensen, Kim Hilby, Teresa Davidson, and Jackie White

Excused Absence: Shirley Fineran

Guests: Elizabeth Phan (Technology Consultant), Shirlee Reding (Emeritus Board Member), Threase Harms (Advocacy Strategies), Chelsea Hoyer (Advocacy Strategies), Richard Westphal (US Attorney), Amy Jennings (Deputy Criminal Chief), and Charlotte Kovacs (Victim Witness Coordinator)

I. Call to order and attendance; start recording.

The meeting was called to order at 2:35 p.m. by Chesser, NAHT chair.

II. Consent Agenda April 9th minutes. Treasurer reports (Chesser and Belitsos):

Belitsos reviewed the treasurer's report and pointed out that donations were only \$200.15 and expenses for April were \$5,955.83. He underscored the need for the chair to appoint a Fundraising Committee. There was no further discussion and Chesser moved to approve both the meeting minutes as amended by Rixner and the treasurer's report. Tinsman seconded the motion. **Both the March minutes and the treasurer's reports were approved unanimously.**

III. Guest from the Office of the US Attorney for the Southern District of Iowa (Chesser):

Chesser welcomed and thanked the guests from the Office of the US Attorney for the Southern District of Iowa. Guests included the US Attorney, Richard Westphal, Deputy Criminal Chief Amy Jennings, and Victim Witness Coordinator, Charlotte Kovacs.

Westphal thanked Chesser for the introduction and started the presentation. He emphasized that sex trafficking cases at the U.S. Attorney's Office are one of their biggest priorities for the Southern District of Iowa. In the last few years, there has been an increase in sex trafficking that includes both children and adult victims. They have developed a good subject matter expertise in sex trafficking because of this. He mentioned that one approach that has become successful is the victim-centered approach, where his office mainly supports the victim during the investigation and after. They would also like to increase awareness of survivor services. There are a lot of collateral crimes that come with sex trafficking. Therefore, sex trafficking has been a high priority in Southern Iowa.

Westphal introduced Jennings and she began by discussing the process of prosecution and approach to the victims. She mentioned their unique approach because of the partnership between the prosecutors in the office and the victim-witness coordinator. Because of this, victims have better support and stability while they go through the process of prosecution. They prosecute at the federal criminal code level. They have their main office in Des Moines, and other offices in Council Bluffs, and Davenport.

They had prosecuted 8 cases and 23 defendants between 2019 and 2021. In 2023, they had 5 sex trafficking trials with 6 defendants in the Southern District of Iowa which is quite a large number because these cases take a large amount of preparation. The law enforcement agencies that work with them are the FBI, The Iowa Department of Public Safety and their Office

to Combat Human Trafficking, the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation, the Des Moines Police Department, the Iowa City Police Department, the Ottumwa and Burlington Police Department and the West and White Police Department. The main statute that they use is the federal 18 United States code, 1591. That is the sex trafficking charge that is available underneath the federal statute and they also bring other charges on top of that.

There are 3 elements for a sex trafficking charge. The first element depends on the defendant's action in facilitating the victim into a commercial sex act. The second element focuses on the defendant's state of mind. The third element is that the defendant's acts were in or affected interstate commerce. The mandatory minimum is 15 years for an adult and the maximum is life. Violence is not necessary in order to have a sex trafficking charge. Jennings provided examples and scenarios of all 3 elements.

Jennings continued and discussed the investigative process. There is a lot of work to prepare for these cases for trial and the quality of the investigator is really important because of how much work there is. These victims need a lot of support and they may have a fear towards law enforcement and may not be ready to talk to law enforcement. Jennings mentions that they need to make sure the victim is confident and prepared because the defense's main strategy is to question the victim's credibility. She listed the type of evidence that they include such as transportation, rentals or hotel rentals, and any tickets to transport the victim around. There could also be money transfers or evidence of drug intake. They also bring in witnesses or even employees and customers to speak at the trial. The investigators are tasked with every type of document and paperwork they could find.

Jennings introduced Kovacs as she mentioned her approach. The victim-centered approach ensures the safety and well-being of the victim. They seek to minimize retraumatizing victims through the criminal justice system process by providing support and services connecting them with resources and really just meeting them where they are both physically and mentally from the very start. They need to gain the victim's trust and they start by having a casual conversation to see about their basic needs and show that they care. She mentioned that everything is calculated like she has her phone on her 24/7 in case a victim calls her, or how they dress casually in front of the victims, and that they try to address the victim's fears as soon as possible. They try to remain calm when the victim has a trauma response. Underneath anger is usually pain and sadness and that is also a trauma response. They measure success by helping victims heal from their trauma and hold offenders accountable. She ends by stating how proud she is that the U.S. Attorney's Office supports the victim-centered approach.

Rixner asked if there is a list available of all the cases that they have done. They mentioned that they would send a list to Chesser. Rixner also asked if there is any labor trafficking that they have done. They mentioned that they have done 2 labor trafficking cases.

Tinsman applauded the office and then asked what are the statistics for human trafficking cases for this year in Iowa and if it increased. Tinsman mentions because they don't have a number, the legislature won't give them as much credibility. Jennings mentions the only statistic available is provided by Polaris, and unfortunately, that is not as accurate as they would like because they have staffing and funding cuts. The US Attorney mentioned that they would find information and send an email to Chesser to see if they could find any statistics from the DOJ.

Belitsos applauded the Southern District office and then asked how many offenders had been convicted. Since the first trafficker case in 2005, there have been 77 convictions through 2022. Westphal said they would email the 2023 stats to Chesser after the meeting. There are only 2

Iowa districts in the Southern and the Northern, and Belitsos asked why there are not any northern US Attorney trafficking cases. Westphal mentioned that it may not be the highest priority in Northern Iowa or there is a need for more training in that area.

Barr asked from their perspective, what should we advocate for? He compliments the victim-centered approach that they have. Since they are federal, their jurisdiction is also federal, so state law does not affect their work. However, they mention that training and education are key, and there needs to be more advocates and survivor service providers. Most law enforcement do not know or have not encountered sex trafficking and they need training in order to recognize whether or not a specific case is in the human trafficking area.

Chesser asked about the police academies and training that they have done. Westphal mentioned ongoing training and have been informed about this for a long time because they work specifically in this field. He also shared the difference between the academies and the advanced academies.

Hilby asked if there are any trainings currently available and Jennigns mentioned that Holly would know what is available in Cedar Rapids. She worked in the Dubuque Attorney's Office for 7 years.

Chesser stated how appreciative he is that the US Attorney's Office came to speak to the NAHT board. He wished them the best.

Several Board members asked Chesser to send the Iowa 2022 HT stat chart. Belitsos reminded Board members that the 2022 chart was in the August 2022 Blog. Chesser agreed to send it again.

IV. Legislative session update (Hoye, Tinsman and Chesser):

Hoye spoke about the legislative session wrap-up and prospects for our legislative priorities in the next legislative session. The 2024 legislature adjourned on what was April 19th and April 20th. She mentioned that the Area Education Agency policies took a lot of time. Legislators were told nothing could move forward until the AEA legislation was done. They had about 3 or 4 weeks to finalize policies and they did not get to see the budget until the last week of the legislature.

3 human trafficking laws have made it past the second funnel. Senate file 2243, which states that it is unlawful to knowingly purchase or possess a visual depiction of a minor engaged in a prohibited sexual act or the simulation of that act. Another bill defines harassment as another person using an individual recognizable by their fake likeness or features whose image is created, adapted or modified. The Senate added amendments to require that anyone over the age of 18 found guilty of this crime will have to register as a tier-one sex offender. The third bill expands the appointment of guardians with offenders with mental instabilities.

Discussion of goals and strategy for the legislative interim and the next session

V. Vote on the nomination of Karl Schilling to the board (Chesser and Fineran):

A motion was made by Chesser to elect Karl Schilling to a two year term of the Network Board of Directors. Belitsos seconded the motion. Belitsos shared high praise for Schilling and he already serves on the NAHT Legislative Advocacy Committee. **The motion passed unanimously.**

VI. Vote on National Hotline Allocation Increase:

Belitsos described the problems with the wait time when calling the National Hotline. Over the last four years alone, total calls have surged by 40%. Meanwhile, funding has not kept pace with growth. Organizations such as the NAHT have been asked to sign a petition to the US Congress to increase the appropriation by 40%. Belitsos had previously sent the Board a copy of the petition and a letter from the hotline answering why Iowa had not been receiving tips from the hotline. **Belitsos made the motion to authorize the chair to sign the Polaris petition seconded by Tinsman. The motion passed unanimously.**

VIII. Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 4:00 p.m. The next meeting is June 11th. No meeting will be held in July due to summer break.