Human Trafficking Task Force Takes Shape in Napa County

By Carlos Villatoro  
Public Affairs and Media Officer

Human trafficking is a violation of human rights and has many negative effects on communities. In Napa County, the problem is less widespread than other parts of the state, and the formation of a new task force aims to keep it that way.

The Napa County Human Trafficking Task Force (NCHTT) consists of members of the Napa County District Attorney’s Office; Napa Special Investigations Bureau (which is comprised of members of each of the county’s law enforcement agencies); Napa County Probation Department; Napa County Child Welfare Services; Monarch Justice Center; NEWS; and Napa’s SANE-SART.

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We are well into the new year and the office has been busy as ever. You may not know that our attorneys don’t just handle cases that are moving through the court system now; they also handle post-conviction cases. Due to changes in the laws, defendants can request “re-sentencings” or a review of their matters to be reconsidered by a judge. In other cases, defendants come up for parole. This latter cluster of cases has been growing as laws have changed allowing more and more defendants to seek early release. This has been a cruel and unwelcome surprise to victims across this state who had believed they would never see, deal or hear from these offenders again.

I am a district attorney who believes that this office’s obligation to victims and their families does not end at a conviction. Rather, I send deputy district attorneys to parole hearings to ensure that the parole board takes into consideration the nature of the underlying crimes as well as the feelings and beliefs of survivors about a defendant’s suitability for parole. This is not an insignificant assignment.

Each time our DAs provide argument at parole suitability hearings, they must re-familiarize themselves with the cases; this involves poring over case files and reaching out to the victims, or their families, friends and loved ones, and providing them the opportunity to address the parole board should they want to.

In January, Deputy District Attorneys Colleen McMahon and Agnes Dziadur attended the parole hearings of two defendants: one who was among four persons responsible for Napa’s first gang murder, the other killed a father and son who were vacationing in Napa with their families from their native New Zealand, to argue against their release. Our office was successful in both proceedings.

While everyone who has committed a crime in Napa County and is paying their debt to society in prison deserves an opportunity for redemption and rehabilitation, it should never come at the expense of public safety. And the deciding body should always hear and consider the opinions of those left behind.
The task force members are familiar to one another as they have previously worked together on human trafficking and awareness campaigns in Napa County. The task force’s goal is to form a dedicated group of professionals from various fields including law enforcement, social services, legal experts and community experts to pool their resources, expertise, and knowledge to combat human trafficking in Napa.

Enhanced coordination among members will empower the task force to provide a more cohesive and effective response to human trafficking in Napa County.

“By breaking down silos and encouraging information sharing, best practices, training opportunities and outreach and engagement strategies, we can wage a more efficient war against human trafficking,” Napa County Chief Deputy District Attorney Taryn Hunter said.

One of the major aspects of the NCHTT is community engagement and outreach, explains Chief DDA Hunter. The task force seeks to actively involve the community in the fight against human trafficking by providing awareness campaigns, training sessions, and outreach programs to help inform and educate the community about the signs of human trafficking and how to report this illicit activity.

“It’s all about creating a network of vigilant eyes and ears that can help law enforcement identify potential human trafficking situations,” she said.

One such campaign took place in January, which is recognized as Human Trafficking Awareness Month. The NCHTT created several posts on social media sites highlighting the problems that human trafficking causes in society, how traffickers reach and recruit often vulnerable individuals, and what people can do to get help if they are being trafficked or know of someone who is.

Another major component of the NCHTT involves a victim-centered approach to tackle the issue. This is where social services, support organizations, and community groups work hand in hand to provide survivors the necessary care, protection and resources to overcome the crime and rebuild their lives.

To date, the NCHTT has met three times, each time at the Monarch Justice Center. During its January 2024 meeting, the task force approved its logo, which depicts a vineyard landscape outlined by the silhouetted shape of the county at its center. Future meetings are planned in which the NCHTT will discuss and plan proactive further efforts and strategies to combat human trafficking in Napa County.
INSIDE THE DA’S OFFICE

Newly Decorated Room Offers Cozy Space for Teens at the Monarch Justice Center

By Jessica Solano
Forensic Interviewer

Creating a space for a teenager to feel at ease in during often traumatic events in their lives requires a bit of finesse.

The soothing color of the walls, the warm ambient lighting; the big bean bag that you can’t miss; the reminders framed on the wall; a fridge stocked up with Gatorades, and the snacks that are on top of it, are but some of the few special touches that we deliberately chose to make teens feel more at home at the Monarch Justice Center.

Christina Gomez, Program Manager for SAVS at NEWS, and I made our best attempt (and I say we have succeeded) at creating a safe, comfortable, and peaceful environment for some of our county’s most vulnerable youths.

The room is located inside the Monarch Justice Center not far from Monarch’s Courage Center, which is Napa County’s Child Advocacy Center (CAC). The room is unlocked, and the T.V. is turned on so when a teen comes in for a forensic interview at the CAC, they have a bit of comfort to greet them.

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Once their family arrives and gets a tour of the CAC, the teen has the option to wait in the Teen Room with the hope that they can use the space for privacy and to settle or soothe their nervousness or anxiety before they share sometimes the worst/most difficult story of their lives.

If a forensic interview is too long, draining, or they just need a break from the stressful and difficult conversation, the teen can come out of the interview room, walk a few steps to the room next door and use the Teen Room to recollect themselves.

There is even a grounding technique framed on the wall that they can use to settle themselves. A teen also has the option to use this room after a forensic interview is conducted to receive confidential crisis counseling through their Sexual Assault Victim Services advocate from NEWS before heading home.

They can grab their favorite-colored drawstring bag and fill it with a beanie baby, a reading book, a coloring book, stickers, a stress relief lion, color pencils, and a snack to take home with them. The Teen Room is not just for teens who come in for a forensic interview, but it is also available for teens that come to the Monarch Justice Center who need a peaceful place to recollect.

The room has so far been used by dozens of teens. It has greatly helped with turning a stressful situation into a more manageable one and we are so grateful to those who allowed us to bring this to life.

“When we got the opportunity to occupy an additional room, it felt like the perfect time to create a space specifically for the children and teens who are interviewed at the Courage Center,” said Christina. “With that need in mind, having a confidential space to offer a child or teen where they can hopefully settle that feeling in their gut before walking into their interview seemed fitting. Not only that but the need to recollect themselves afterward and receive confidential crisis counseling through their Sexual Assault Victim Services advocate from NEWS before heading home. The eagerness to be able to offer a cozy environment where they can put together a self-care bag, shoot some hoops to pump out that adrenaline, have a snack while lying in the giant bean bag or practice a breathing technique with the beanie baby of their choice, was a vision that quickly came to fruition.”
Jacqueline Remo, Victim Witness Advocate

Jacqueline Remo joined the Napa County District Attorney’s Office in late December as a Victim Witness Advocate. She comes to the Napa County District Attorney’s Office from the Child Abuse Prevention Council in Stockton, where she worked as a family advocate/facilitator for over six years.

Jacqueline is passionate about being a voice for others through her work as an advocate. She has an A.A.S in Criminology & Emergency Response Management and has worked with various programs such as Head Start and Parent Cafe.

In San Joaquin County, Jacqueline started a Men’s Support Group and taught various courses such as Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) and Adult Mental Health First AID USA.

Her expertise regarding the six protective factors and experience as a parent instructor for Child Protective Services, Courts and Probation; an emergency medical technician; a domestic violence counselor; and training in trauma-informed care makes her a valuable addition to the Napa County District Attorney’s Office. Jacqueline is also bilingual/bicultural, adding further value to the Napa DA’s Office and the community.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

The Napa County District Attorney’s Office has a new Podcast!

The Sidebar Podcast will encompass everything pertaining to the work the DA’s Office performs on behalf of the People, both in and out of the courtroom. Subscribe to our YouTube channel so you don’t miss an upload!
Napa SANE-SART Victim Services Director Melissa Nickson and Public Affairs and Media Officer Carlos Villatoro take on the topic of Human Trafficking in Napa in the latest edition of the Sidebar Podcast. Photo: Lauren Weitz.

Sidebar Podcast: Spotlight on Human Trafficking

By: Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

In the latest edition of the Sidebar Podcast, I had the opportunity to chat with Melissa Nickson, the program director for SANE-SART’s Victim Services division. Melissa has seen the problem of human trafficking unfold in front of her very eyes through her work in Solano and Napa counties.

While not as widespread as larger cities in the Bay Area, Napa has seen this crime and programs such as SANE-SART and family justice centers such as the Monarch Justice Center are critical players in helping victims of human trafficking escape from their situations and rebuild their lives.

You can listen to the podcast by visiting the official YouTube channel of the Napa County District Attorney’s Office. Don’t forget to drop a comment, leave a like on the video and consider subscribing to the channel for more of the Sidebar Podcast and other videos created by the Napa DA’s Office.
IN THE COMMUNITY

Out & About

CRIMINAL JUSTICE DAY
LEADERSHIP NAPA VALLEY
1/9/2024

MEMORIAL FOR TUAN QUOC LE
OAKLAND POLICE DEPARTMENT
1/10/2024

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Photos: Nick Conrad and Leadership Napa Valley
People V. James Timothy Spencer

Napa County Superior Court Judge Mark Boessenecker sentenced James Timothy Spencer, age 49, to 180 days in jail during a sentencing hearing that took place on January 12, 2024.

In addition to the jail sentence, the Honorable Judge Boessenecker ordered the defendant to stay away from the victim in the case, register as a sex offender, and pay restitution to the victim of $420 plus interest of 10 percent per year.

A Napa jury found the defendant guilty of prowling and loitering:peeking after a multi-week jury trial that occurred in late November.

Napa County Deputy District Attorney Lauren Kownacki prosecuted the case against the defendant on behalf of the People.

People V. Jose Humberto Marin

The California Board of Parole Hearings denied parole for Jose Humberto Marin, age 43, who is serving a sentence of 40 years to life for his role in the gang-related shooting of Michael Arreguin, age 18 at the time.

The Board of Parole Hearings denied Marin’s parole for three years, noting concerns with Marin’s static factors including his continued gang involvement and criminal behavior while incarcerated, and his too-recent recovery path for substance abuse issues.

The defendant was one of four individuals including Jacob Wayne Hutchins, age 45, Gonzalo Serafin Alcala, age 41, and Robert Cendejas, age 42, convicted for the 1998 gang murder, said to be the first gang murder in Napa County’s history.

Napa County Deputy District Attorney Colleen McMahon appeared at the January 4, 2024, hearing that took place at California State Prison, Solano, to argue against the parole of Marin based upon the cruelty and callousness of the murder and his gang associations.
People V. Eligio Ruiz Ortiz

A petition to parole convicted murderer Eligio Ruiz Ortiz, age 56, was denied by the California Board of Parole Hearings during a January 10, 2024, hearing held at California State Prison, Chuckwalla, on January 10, 2024.

The California Board of Parole Hearings denied Ortiz parole for three years. Ortiz stands convicted of two counts of second-degree murder, and was sentenced on June 28, 2001, to two concurrent sentences of 15 years to life in state prison.

Ortiz is serving his prison sentence for the vehicular murder that took the lives of New Zealand resident Anthony Pilton, age 39, and his 9-year-old son, Adam, on September 29, 2000.

On that day, Ortiz drove a flat-bed truck and was chasing the vehicle of his estranged wife northbound along Highway 29, near St. Helena, when he crossed over the double-yellow line to pass a vehicle in front of him and collided head-on with the victims’ vehicle traveling south on the highway. The collision instantly killed the father and son and severely injured Anthony’s wife Nicole Pilton; their youngest 6-year-old son was also injured in the collision.

Ortiz’s lengthy criminal history shows a pattern of bad driving with prior DUI convictions, along with several traffic violations. At the time of the collision, Ortiz was on probation for domestic violence.

Napa County Deputy District Attorney Agnes Dziadur appeared at the hearing to argue against Ortiz’s release, noting his lack of insight into his criminality and lack of remorse and understanding of his crimes.

People V. Daryl Leon Huff II

A Napa jury convicted Daryl Leon Huff II, age 29, of assault with force likely to produce great bodily injury and misuse of tear gas after a week-long jury trial that took place in late January.

The jury found true that the defendant pepper sprayed the victim as he dined at Farmstead Restaurant in St. Helena with his family, after a verbal altercation that took place on March 24, 2021. The victim’s wife and baby were also exposed to the pepper spray during the attack.

The case against Mr. Huff II was prosecuted by DDA Colleen McMahon. He is scheduled to be in court on February 27, 2024, in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court for a sentencing hearing.