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New Jersey Man Sentenced on Sex Trafficking Charges

DES MOINES, IA – On July 19, 2013, Johnelle Lewis Bell, age 29, of Hammonton, New Jersey, was sentenced in United States District Court in Des Moines on charges of sex trafficking and associated charges, announced United States Attorney Nicholas A. Klinefeldt. Chief United States District Court Judge James E. Gritzner sentenced Bell to a net term of imprisonment of 360 months, to be followed by 5 years of supervised release. Bell was also ordered to pay a \$1,200.00 special assessment for the Crime Victim Fund. Bell remained in the custody of the United States Marshal's Service pending designation of the Federal Bureau of Prisons facility at which he will serve his sentence.

There is no parole in the federal system. Bell will serve an estimated 85% of his sentence of imprisonment, then be placed on supervised release. If Bell violates the conditions of his supervised release, a judge could sentence him to further imprisonment.

“Defendant Johnelle Bell essentially enslaved these women, and forced them to commit sex acts for his financial gain. Bell’s sentence, which he must serve 85% of, reflects the seriousness of his crime,” said United States Attorney Nicholas Klinefeldt.

In all, Bell was sentenced on 12 charges. The charges and respective sentences are as follows:

- Count 1, conspiracy to commit sex trafficking: 360 months imprisonment;
- Counts 2 and 3, sex trafficking: 180 months imprisonment on each count;
- Counts 4-7, coercion or enticement to travel in interstate commerce for prostitution: 240 months imprisonment on each count;

- Count 8, conspiracy to transport in interstate commerce for prostitution: 60 months imprisonment;
- Counts 9-12, transportation in interstate commerce for prostitution: 120 months imprisonment on each count.

All of the sentences were imposed to run concurrently.

Bell was originally indicted in a twelve-count indictment on April 26, 2012, and a twelve-count superseding indictment was returned by the Federal Grand Jury on November 6, 2012. On November 20, 2012, following an almost week-long trial, a federal jury in Council Bluffs found Bell guilty of all twelve counts with which he was charged.

The charges arose from a prostitution sting operation on June 18, 2011, by the Child Exploitation Task Force (formerly the Great Plains Innocence Lost Task Force) operating in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area. The Task Force is led by the Omaha Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and at the time of this sting operation, included officers from the Council Bluffs Police Department, the Southwest Iowa Narcotics Enforcement Task Force, and the Omaha Police Department. Agents from FBI offices other than Omaha were also participating in this operation. The Task Force emphasizes crimes against minors, but also investigates adult sex trafficking cases discovered in the course of its pro-active investigations. While this case dealt primarily with young adult females roughly 19-23 years of age, at least two of the young adults involved in this case reported becoming engaged in prostitution as minors, by at least about ages 16 or 17.

“This sentencing removes an evil predator from the streets and prevents him from exploiting others”, said FBI Special Agent in Charge Thomas R. Metz. “The FBI led Child Exploitation Task Force will continue to aggressively pursue and bring to justice individuals such as Bell who prey on others in such a cruel manner.”

On June 18, 2011, answering ads for prostitution on Backpage.com, for Omaha, Nebraska and Council Bluffs, Iowa, an undercover FBI agent posing as a customer arranged a “date” for prostitution. At the ensuing raid, agents and officers encountered Johnelle Lewis Bell and three adult females engaged in prostitution. The resulting federal investigation uncovered a sex trafficking venture involving Bell and as yet to be formally identified “pimp partners,” centering around Little Rock, Arkansas. Evidence produced at trial showed the traveling prostitution venture operating in at least Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Maryland, South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee. Two of the sex trafficking counts related to incidents in May and June of 2011 in Des Moines, Iowa. Prostitution ads by Bell were also posted in the Quad Cities area of Iowa and Illinois, and in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area of Nebraska and Iowa.

Young adult women formerly working as prostitutes for Bell testified at trial regarding their histories of very troubled childhoods, mental and emotional problems, homelessness and lack of material support, and substance abuse. These victims testified that Bell lured them to work for Bell on promises of love and long-lasting personal relationships, and help with problems in their lives. However, once they engaged in prostitution for Bell, the promises evaporated, and all of the money from the sex acts they performed at Bell’s direction, went to Bell.

One of the victims testified she was repeatedly physically assaulted by Bell, including being whipped with a belt and severely beaten on at least two other occasions, in part for “disrespecting” her pimp, Bell; for threatening to go to the police; for falling asleep while she was supposed to be engaged in prostitution for Bell; to force her to commit sex acts she did not want to commit; and to keep her from leaving Bell as a prostitute working under his control.

According to this witness, Bell not only physically beat her, but also threatened the victim, her family, and her very young child with serious harm or death if she did not do as Bell told her. According to testimony at trial, her ordeal ended on June 18, 2011, when she was, with others, rescued by members of the Task Force operating in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area.

Another victim testified about having been at a “party-weekend” with Bell and others, and then being held by Bell against her will for approximately a week, moved from state to state by Bell, and forced by Bell to engage in prostitution. The victim testified that she was forced to stay with Bell and engage in prostitution under his control, by Bell’s threats of seriously harming or killing the victim, her family, and particularly the victim’s 2-3 year old daughter, and because she knew that another young woman under Bell’s control had been very badly treated by Bell. According to testimony at trial, her ordeal also ended on June 18, 2011, about a week after Bell forced her to be under his control.

Brittany Lawson, age 23, of Hot Springs, Arkansas, a co-defendant of Bell’s, pled guilty on October 12, 2012, to Count 1 of the original Indictment, conspiracy to commit sex trafficking. Ms. Lawson was sentenced on February 25, 2013, in Council Bluffs, by Chief United States District Court Judge James E. Gritzner, to 50 months imprisonment, to be followed by 5 years of supervised release, and a \$100.00 special assessment for the Crime Victims Fund. Lawson is currently serving her term of imprisonment. Lawson was, throughout much of the conspiracy, the prostitute who assisted Bell in managing the other prostitutes. None of the acts of force, fraud or coercion alleged against Bell were alleged to have been committed by Lawson. However, she knew what was happening to the other prostitutes and still managed them for Bell.

This case was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Council Bluffs Police Department, the SouthWest Iowa Narcotics Enforcement Task Force, and the Omaha Police Department, and had assistance from other law enforcement in a number of states. The investigation of this case took place in Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and other locations. This case was prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Iowa.

The task force which worked this case and is working others in Iowa and Nebraska, primarily in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metro Area, is being expanded to include other law enforcement agencies. Further, the task force could not do its work without the substantial assistance of victims by victim treatment and advocacy agencies in the area and elsewhere. The task force has significant ties with emergency care, shelter, and other government and non-government agencies throughout the area and beyond, providing needed security, and emergency and long-term care to victims of human trafficking. Both the FBI and United States Attorney's Office Victim Specialists are active in working with these other agencies to ensure and enhance the treatment and other assistance needed when victims of sex trafficking are encountered.

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