



# Department of Justice

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Southern District of Iowa

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## **NEW JERSEY MAN CONVICTED ON SEX TRAFFICKING CHARGES.**

Council Bluffs, IA – On November 20, 2012, following a four day trial, a federal jury in Council Bluffs found Johnelle Lewis Bell, age 28, of Hammonton, New Jersey, guilty on twelve counts of sex trafficking and interstate prostitution, announced United States Attorney Nicholas A. Klinefeldt. Chief United States District Court Judge James E. Gritzner set sentencing for March 8, 2013. Defendant is detained in the custody of the United States Marshal pending sentencing.

The Defendant faces the following statutory sentences:

Count 1, conspiracy to commit sex trafficking: any term of years to life imprisonment, a fine of not more than \$250,000.00, or both such imprisonment and fine, and a term of supervised of not more than 5 years.

Counts 2 and 3, sex trafficking: on each count, 15 years to life imprisonment, a fine of not more than \$250,000.00, or both such imprisonment and fine, and a term of supervised release of at least 5 years to life.

Counts 4-7, inclusive, coercion or enticement to travel in interstate commerce for prostitution: on each count, not more than 20 years imprisonment, a fine of not more than \$250,000.00, or both such imprisonment and fine, and a term of supervised release of not more than 5 years.

Count 8, conspiracy to transport in interstate commerce for prostitution: not more than 5 years imprisonment, a fine of not more than \$250,000.00, or both such imprisonment and fine,

and a term of supervised release of not more than 3 years.

Counts 9-12, inclusive, transportation in interstate commerce for prostitution: on each count, not more than 10 years imprisonment, a fine of not more than \$250,000.00, or both such imprisonment and fine, and a term of supervised release of not more than 3 years.

The Defendant was originally indicted in the twelve-count indictment on April 26, 2012. A twelve-count superseding indictment was returned by the Federal Grand Jury on November 6, 2012.

The charges arose from a prostitution sting operation on June 18, 2011, by the Great Plains Innocence Lost Task Force. The Task Force is led by the Omaha Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and includes officers from the Council Bluffs Police Department, the Southwest Iowa Narcotics Enforcement Task Force, and the Omaha Police Department.

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 prostitution venture centering around Little Rock, Arkansas. Evidence produced at trial showed the traveling prostitution venture operated 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 the Defendant were also posted in the Quad Cities area of Iowa and Illinois.

Persons formerly working as prostitutes for the Defendant testified at trial regarding their histories of very troubled childhoods, mental and emotional problems, and substance abuse. These persons testified that the Defendant lured them to work for Defendant on promises of

long-lasting personal relationships, and help with problems in their lives. However, once they engaged in prostitution for the Defendant the promises evaporated, and all of the money from the sex acts they performed at Defendant's direction went to the Defendant. One of the victims testified she was then physically assaulted by the Defendant, including being whipped with a belt and severely beaten on at least two other occasions, in part for "disrespecting" her pimp, the Defendant, for threatening to go to the police, for falling asleep while she was supposed to be engaged in prostitution for the Defendant, and to force her to commit sex acts she did not want to commit. Another victim testified about having been at a "party-weekend" with the Defendant and others, and then being held by the Defendant against her will for approximately a week and forced to engage in prostitution, by threats of serious harm against the victim, her family, and particularly the victim's 2-3 year old daughter. According to testimony at trial, her ordeal ended when she was rescued by the Innocence Lost Task Force operation on June 18, 2011.

Brittany Lawson, a Co-defendant of Bell's, pled guilty to Count 1 of the indictment, conspiracy to commit sex trafficking, on October 12, 2012. Ms. Lawson is released on supervision of the United States Probation Office pending sentencing on January 18, 2012.

This case is being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Council Bluffs Police Department, the SouthWest Iowa Narcotics Enforcement Task Force, and the Omaha Police Department. This case is being prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Iowa.