

U.S. Attorney's Report to the District

New Civil Rights/Human Trafficking Group

Civil rights enforcement has historically been a part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Justice, and under this Administration in particular, it has been one of our highest priorities. Another important priority, which has increasingly been a focus of law enforcement at the federal, state and local level, is human trafficking. Attorney General Loretta Lynch has made increasing human trafficking enforcement one of her most important objectives. Here in the Eastern District of California, we have long been active in bringing civil rights and human trafficking cases, but in an effort to do more, this month I announced the creation of a new Civil Rights/Human Trafficking Working Group.

The new working group consists of ten Assistant U.S. Attorneys, spread across all of our three offices -- Sacramento, Fresno and Bakersfield. It includes AUSAs in both our criminal and civil divisions. They will each participate in specialized training and engage in outreach designed to develop prosecutable cases. The activities of the group will be overseen by Executive Assistant U.S. Attorney Philip Ferrari.

Civil rights prosecutions include hate crimes, such as the case currently being prosecuted by our Bakersfield office, in which the defendant allegedly fired a shotgun at a Latino man outside his home while yelling racist slurs. It also includes "color of law" cases involving excessive force or other constitutional violations by law enforcement. In one such case, our Sacramento office secured a significant prison term against a police officer who sexually assaulted a woman in custody. Civil rights enforcement can also be accomplished through civil litigation, including suits brought under the Fair Housing Act, and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. Our Fresno office brought one such case against a Bakersfield landlord who demanded sexual favors from female tenants. The suit resulted in a \$2.1 million settlement, most of which went to victims, and a requirement that the defendant retain an independent property manager.

Human trafficking cases are prosecuted under other statutes, and usually involve either the trafficking of domestic and foreign-born minors and women for commercial sex, or the trafficking of vulnerable workers who are exploited for their labor. Our office has brought numerous sex trafficking prosecutions in recent years. Percy Love, a pimp who degraded and abused the girls and women he prostituted, was sentenced last month to 35 years in prison. Over the last 24 months, about another dozen similar defendants have received federal prison sentences of ten years or more. Labor trafficking cases are more difficult to identify and develop into prosecutions due to a number of factors, including employer sophistication, a fear of reporting to the authorities, and the fact that many victims are toiling away from public view at jobs that are not otherwise illegal. But Assistant U.S. Attorneys in this office, together with the California Attorney General's Office, have developed and presented training sessions for work site inspectors on how to recognize the signs of labor trafficking, and we have several active investigations. In December, this office was selected to lead one of six new federal anti-trafficking task forces that were announced in Washington, DC.

Both civil rights and human trafficking cases require a thorough knowledge of the applicable statutes, and a particular sensitivity to the needs of those who survive these crimes. Cases are developed with local and federal law enforcement, often with the assistance of non-profit service providers and shelters. There is frequently a need to draw on the expertise of the DOJ Civil Rights Division, and to work with interpreters and victim/survivor advocates.

The identification of human trafficking cases, and ultimate dismantling of trafficking organizations and networks, requires your help too. We rely upon the public to be vigilant and willing to report suspected trafficking activity. If you are aware of any suspected human trafficking activity, please contact the National Human Trafficking Resources Center by calling 1-888-373-7888 or texting HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733). The National Human Trafficking Resource Center is a national, toll-free hotline, available to answer calls and texts from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. The Center is operated by the Polaris Project, a non-profit, non-governmental organization working exclusively on the issue of human trafficking. Polaris Project is not a government entity, law enforcement or an immigration authority. Of course, you can also contact our office, and in the case of an emergency, call 9-1-1.

This office is strongly committed to civil rights and human trafficking enforcement. Commitment alone, however, is not enough. By creating a team of attorneys with the requisite training and skills to effectively handle the unique challenges of civil rights and human trafficking cases, we hope to do even more to protect the victims of these crimes and to bring their abusers to justice.

If you would like to communicate with our office, contact the main number in Sacramento, or submit a suggestion by clicking on the button below. Thank you.

United States Attorney

Benjamin B. Wagner