

Five Women Dedicated to Justice Lead Conversation on Human Trafficking

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Winston's Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) presented a discussion on the difficult and extremely important topic of Human Trafficking in response to firm member requests for more programming around social justice issues.



Martina Vandenberg, Founder and President of the Human Trafficking Legal Center (HTLC), began the conversation with what is and is not human trafficking. "Trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to hold someone in forced labor or forced prostitution," she told the more than 400 firm members, clients, and alumni in attendance. She went on to explain that human trafficking is both organized and unorganized crime and that, with few exceptions, her organization's entire case load involves victims of forced labor in the United States. HTLC has trained thousands of lawyers in large firms to provide pro bono legal services to these victims in connection with federal cases

seeking restitution, federal civil litigation, securing visas, and expunging the records of those convicted of crimes their traffickers forced them to commit.

Following up on Martinas's remark that most victims in the United States are young women of color, panelist **Paula Meyer Besler** elaborated on the populations disproportionately impacted by trafficking. "In our country, it's happening in every zip code across every socioeconomic level and every race and religion," she said. Human trafficking is a public health epidemic to which those in the African American community are especially vulnerable. Paula is Vice President of Advocacy and Operations at Selah Freedom, which works to end sex trafficking and bring freedom to the exploited through its Advocacy & Awareness, Prevention, Outreach, and Residential programs. Paula, who formerly worked in the Cook County State's Attorney's Sex Crime Unit, described her work with law enforcement to reach victims who are in jail and help them have a better life and to shift the public conversation away from criminal to survivor.



We were also pleased to welcome **Theresa Forbes**, who has drawn on her prior experience as an attorney with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement **Human Rights Section** and international affairs advisor at the U.S. Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network to create a new role at Treasury leading anti-human trafficking efforts. We are taking the four Ps approach – prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships – using the economic and financial tools available to follow the financial flows from human trafficking to root out human rights abusers and get that money back to the victims, she explained. "It's estimated that \$150 billion is generated each year from forced labor and sex trafficking. While this staggering number is outdated and does not account for the proceeds from products made with forced labor, it tells us that trafficking is one of the largest proceed-generating crimes."

Panelist **Layli Miller-Muro**, Founder and Executive Director of Tahirih Justice Center, spoke to attendees about the difference between illegal immigration and human trafficking. "Someone might come into the United States having obtained a visitor or fiancé visa through their trafficker. On paper they would be completely legal, but they didn't by design want to be here. In other situations, we have clients who don't even know they have crossed the border. Typically, they are coming from Central America and their traffickers are members of gangs." Layli established Tahirih following her involvement in the high-profile case of a 17-year-old girl who had fled Togo, the decision in which opened the door to gender-based persecution as grounds for asylum in the United States.

The moderator noted that Tahirih not only provides pro bono legal services to help victims get compensated but also provides comprehensive social services to ensure survivors' other needs are met. "It is additionally about one's

dignity and integrity, being able to find a home to stay with your children and to educate them, so we have social workers who partner with our pro bono attorneys,” Layli said.

Paula went through some of the signs that a person is being trafficked, while Martina cautioned attendees about directly intervening. “The person who is being trafficked is the very best judge of whether or not that person is safe,” she said, and “people need to make their own decisions about when to leave.” Layli encouraged everyone to help victims and survivors through pro bono work and charitable donations, while also thinking about purchasing and power end of human trafficking. “It’s ending the source demand that is the most important work.”

Attendees received additional resources on human trafficking awareness and prevention after the program.

3 Min Read

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