

The WATCH Chronicle

WATCH is a court monitoring and judicial policy non-profit located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. WATCH works to make the justice system more responsive to crimes of violence against women and children, focusing on greater safety for victims of violence and greater accountability for violent offenders.

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WATCH FEATURE

Holger-Ambrose: It's all about trust

First in a two-part series

In her 15 years of working with homeless, runaway and sexually exploited youth, Beth Holger-Ambrose has noticed something striking: Their heart-wrenching adversity has, quite often, made them stronger.

"These young people are incredibly resilient, incredibly strong and incredibly smart," she said. "They can read people like no other."

Holger-Ambrose preaches compassion, positive development and the importance of fostering trust as executive director of The Link, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that provides services to sexually trafficked youth. She played a pivotal role in helping Minnesota fashion its "No Wrong Door" policy, a holistic approach to assisting trafficked victims. The policy was implemented statewide in September 2014, three years after passage of Safe Harbor, which ensures that sexually exploited youth are treated as victims under state law.

Instead of being placed in detention, trafficked youth under the "No Wrong Door" model are referred to appropriate services in order to heal.

The Link hosts one of Minnesota's eight Safe Harbor navigators, helping connect trafficked or exploited youth from Hennepin, Scott and Carver counties with needed services. The non-profit also runs Passageways, an emergency shelter and housing program specifically designed for young people who've been sexually exploited. In the 12 months since its September 2014 opening, Passageways served 51 youth, 90 percent of them girls. Around 80 percent of those served successfully transitioned out of the program their first time through, according to Holger-Ambrose.

Recently, we caught up with Holger-Ambrose for a wide-ranging interview about her take on No Wrong Door, building trust and the specific needs of kids who have gone through the trauma of sexual exploitation.



Beth Holger-Ambrose, executive director of The Link – West Metro Regional Navigator for No Wrong Door

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Q: You've talked about the importance of trust and why it can take so long to develop given what [exploited youth] have been through. Is that the framework through which you operate?

A: Yes, definitely. We use trauma-informed care. There are so many negative attributes given to children who've been exploited, but there are also tons of positive ones. It's just a matter of recognizing those and bringing those out and letting [the youth] talk to you when they're ready.

What I like about our services for sexually exploited and homeless youth is there's an open-ended length of time we can work with you, not a prescriptive 90 days and you're done. Because it takes a while for relationships to develop.

Q: Can you talk about the role youth play in your programming?

A: When we decided to open our Safe Harbor programs, we hired a group of youth who had been sexually trafficked to help us design the programs – everything from the rules to the services. They helped us pick the staff. They designed bedrooms and shelters for youth. They're literally co-founders of Passageways. They even named it Passageways.

That's how we try to do all of our programming at The Link. The adult staff don't always know the best thing.

Q: Did the youth suggest any approaches that you wouldn't have thought of?

A: In our shelter and housing programs, we've always let youth have cell phones. But with sex-trafficked youth, there's a lot more safety risks with that. Perhaps their trafficker put a GPS on it so they can keep track of them. And some youth are in love with their traffickers. I thought we could have a policy that you can have a cell phone when you leave the building. But a youth on our advisory committee said, 'No, Beth, you have to take those phones from them right when they come in because it's a huge safety risk.' So that's what we did.

Q: What are your thoughts on keeping housing separate for sexually exploited youth?

A: It's really good to have that option. What I've learned ... is that if you had a sexually exploited youth, oftentimes recruiting would happen. You might have one youth involved in "the life" and then all of a sudden, three weeks later, everyone is.

That's one of the biggest reasons why I'm for separate programming. It's hard to hear people say sexually exploited youth are like all other youth. No, they've had a different type of trauma. We want to recognize that and provide services that trafficked youth have identified work for them—like specific mental health therapy and survivor mentors and all kinds of groups that are specifically designed for them.

(Next month: working with law enforcement.) ♦♦♦



“There are so many negative attributes given to children who’ve been exploited, but there are also tons of positive ones.”



IN THE NEWS

Hmong advocates speak out against child brides, abusive marriages

Members of the Hmong-American community are speaking out about the abuse of girls and women because of a practice in which local men bring back young brides from Laos, some as young as 14.

In a [Star Tribune article published Nov. 1](#), Mila Koumpilova details the divisions within Minnesota's Hmong community over international marriages. Advocates say such relationships can breed abuse, both toward young brides and first wives rejected in their favor.

Sia Her, Pheng Thao and others have hosted community discussions and lined up state funding to study abusive international marriages and other forms of gender-based violence. [A lawsuit by a young Laotian woman](#) has also brought scrutiny to the issue.

- Read the *Star Tribune* news article [here](#).

- According to a 2013 report by the Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, what are the factors in international marriages that can set the stage for abuse?
- How can the practice of Hmong men bringing younger brides from abroad affect families on both continents?

Read the [Star Tribune article](#) to find out.

St. Paul marks five years of domestic violence effort

St. Paul officials last month marked five years of an initiative that aims to stop domestic violence and deaths.

[The Blueprint for Safety initiative](#) is designed to include all parts of the criminal justice system working together to keep victims safe, hold offenders accountable and stop domestic-violence homicides.

From 2008 to 2014, St. Paul saw the number of domestic violence calls drop from 9,557 to 4,885. So far this year, calls are down by 400.

- Read the *Star Tribune* news article [here](#).
- Read the *Pioneer Press* news article [here](#).



Facebook, New York state team up to fight on-line sex trafficking

Facebook is using its expertise at finding friends and picking out faces to catch on-line sex traffickers and identify victims.

[An Oct. 8 Fortune article](#) reported that Facebook engineers will help the office of New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman develop algorithms that identify patterns or characteristics in online ads that are linked to human trafficking. Advertisements' images, words, phone numbers and more will be analyzed.

The Attorney General's office cited examples of trafficking rings that posted pictures of minors on websites such as Backpage and Craigslist, describing the practice as "modern day slavery."

- Read the *Fortune* article [here](#).



Column: Traumatic brain injury among abuse victims a secret epidemic

While medical science has revealed the prevalence of traumatic brain injury (TBI) among combat soldiers and athletes, a much larger population may also be suffering from the devastating effects of TBI: victims of domestic violence.

In an [Oct. 12 op-ed in the Los Angeles Times](#), Maria E. Garay-Serratos contends that evidence strongly points to a silent epidemic of TMI among abuse victims, with major public health ramifications. Garay-Serratos is chief executive officer of Sojourner Center, a domestic violence shelter in Phoenix. The center recently launched a program dedicated to research and treatment of TBI in women and children living with domestic violence.

"We must treat domestic violence like the emergency it is," Garay-Serratos writes, "one that impairs the ability of those affected to fully participate in the workforce ... and in their communities."

- Read the op-ed article [here](#).

- True or false: domestic violence shelters routinely screen clients for TBI, and staff members are trained to address it if encountered.
- How many women and children nationally are exposed to the risk of TBI each year, according to Garay-Serratos?

Read the *L.A. Times* op-ed [here](#) to learn the answers.

COURT MONITORING BULLETIN



Volunteer Spotlight: Christian Spas

After being a student for all but five of his 20 years, **Christian Spas** was eager to acquire some real-world experience. The native of Sweden is getting plenty, now that he's spending the next several months as an intern for WATCH.

Spas has been a fixture around the WATCH offices this fall, working four days a week since the beginning of September. He has monitored more than 120 cases so far—everything from stalking and domestic abuse to murder, sex trafficking and prostitution. His volunteer stint will run through February.

Born and raised in a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden, Spas is the son of an American father and a Romanian-born mother. The self-described sports and food buff spent the past two years studying sociology and international relations at the University of Leeds in northern England. His aunt, April Spas, has been volunteering for WATCH since November 2014; it was through her that Christian Spas learned about the internship opportunity.

Recently, WATCH had a chance to ask Spas about his volunteer experience so far. Here's what we learned:

“The biggest challenge is to stay unbiased and to keep yourself from becoming emotionally involved. Because on paper, everything seems black and white.”

On his decision to intern for WATCH:

“I got interested in WATCH initially because of its relationship with human rights, specifically women's rights and children's rights. ... I was lucky enough to have relatives living here, which facilitated my being able to intern for WATCH.”

On his impressions of the U.S. judicial system so far:

“I can see some differences—for example, the way we treat cases of prostitution. Sweden uses the ‘Nordic Model,’ where selling is legal, but buying and trafficking is illegal; this takes a lot of the heat away from the prostituted individuals, and puts more focus on the individuals who are the main drivers of the industry: the suppliers and the demand.”

On his biggest challenges as a courtroom monitor:

“The biggest challenge is to stay unbiased and to keep yourself from becoming emotionally involved. Because on paper, everything seems black and white, very clear and easy. But when you go into court, you see the people in real life, how their lives are affected, how they react, how their loved ones react and their stories.”

“It was not that the facts had changed, it was more that I saw the people and the lives that were affected.”

On a hearing or case that stood out:

“One case involved a father having molested his stepdaughter and another relative many years ago. They had not come out about it until now, and the case was ongoing. As I was watching the case, I saw what seemed to be most of the defendant’s family—sons, cousins, wife, siblings, even the stepdaughter herself—hoping that the father would be freed from all charges. The daughter made a statement asking only for an apology and nothing else, as she had moved on and was not holding a grudge against him. The other victim was also there and hoping for a conviction; she said so in a statement. As the father was convicted, there were a lot of protests and tears in the room. People were horrified at the decision, and there was a lot of anger and sorrow. Before I went in the room, I had all the facts and was hoping for a conviction myself, but as I left I was not as convinced. It was not that the facts had changed; it was more that I saw the people and the lives that were affected. Of course, I know he should be punished for his crimes, as they were horrible. However, it was hard not to be affected by the family and their support.

“Another thing that stands out for me was [when] I went to see a priority case—a probation violation—that was not out of the ordinary. The attorneys were behind closed doors with [Hennepin County Judge Jay Quam], and as they came out, Judge Quam asked me and the two volunteers I was training to come talk to him. He was a really humane person. ... He looked at people as human beings, not as felons or non-felons. It was really fun and interesting to talk to him and learn how he looks at the justice system.”

On his future pursuits: “I hope to be able to work within foreign policy, either through non-governmental organizations or through the government. And right now I have a special interest in the refugee crisis surrounding Syria and Iraq.”

Partnership with MN Justice Foundation funnels law students to WATCH



A partnership between WATCH and the Minnesota Justice Foundation has brought more than three dozen Twin Cities-area law students into the WATCH fold over the past year. Currently, 37 law students volunteer for WATCH. They come from William Mitchell College of Law (8), University of St. Thomas School of Law (9), Hamline University School of Law (10) and the University of Minnesota Law School (10).

The MJF links law students to opportunities throughout the legal services community. It strives for justice by creating opportunities to perform public interest and pro bono legal services. □

SEX TRAFFICKING UPDATE

Final defendant in St. Paul trafficking ring sentenced to 9 years in prison



Suwuan D. Cross (courtesy of the Ramsey County Sheriff)

Online ads were placed in states including Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois and Georgia

The fifth and final suspect in a 14-state sex trafficking ring that victimized more than 100 young women, including at least one minor girl, has been sentenced.

Suwuan Dominique Cross, 20, of St. Paul, was sentenced Oct. 29 to nine years in prison, with credit for 240 days served. She pleaded guilty in July to three felony charges, including two of trafficking a minor. As part of a plea deal, the final four charges were dismissed.

Four others were convicted as co-conspirators in the trafficking ring. They received sentences totaling nearly 50 years in prison.

Thomas W. Evans, 26, was sentenced to 20 years in prison; **Ishmael J. Williams**, 20, was sentenced to 12 ½ years in prison; **Yolanda K. Foster**, 28, was sentenced to eight years in prison; and **Doris M. Keller**, 39, was sentenced to a 13-year stayed prison sentence.

According to criminal complaints, sex trafficking took place in St. Paul, Brooklyn Park and Maplewood, along with Milwaukee and Racine, Wis.; Memphis, Tenn.; and Chicago. Online ads were placed in several states, including Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois and Georgia.

Trafficking cases by the numbers

In January 2014, WATCH launched a three-year, in-depth project to monitor juvenile sex-trafficking cases involving minors in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. Nearly two years in, about three-quarters of the 44 cases involving minors have been resolved.

In all, WATCH has monitored 85 cases of sex trafficking—66 in Hennepin County, 19 in Ramsey County. Of the cases involving minors, 33 were prosecuted in Hennepin County and 11 in Ramsey County. As of Oct. 30, all but 10 of the cases in Hennepin County had been resolved. Three of the unresolved cases involve outstanding warrants.

The Oct. 29 sentencing of **Suwuan D. Cross** (see above) closed the final unresolved case in Ramsey County.

WATCH is gathering data so that it can evaluate the effect of the state's Safe Harbor law and the differences between the counties' handling of cases involving trafficked minors. ♦♦♦

