

Interagency Collaboration to Address Human Trafficking

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Yinay Ruiz, Our Kids of Miami-Dade County; Dr. Kimberly McGrath, Citrus Health Network; Hon. Maria Sampedro-Iglesia, 11th District (FL) Court

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Today on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, an example of why inter-agency collaboration designed to support children and youth in need, specifically regarding human trafficking. Hi everyone, I'm Tom Oates with Information Gateway. The Federal Government is placing a greater emphasis on recognizing, addressing and reducing human trafficking, and child welfare is impacted because children and youth placed in foster care due to abuse or neglect along with runaway or homeless youth, they are at high risk of being trafficked.

Now, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, which was signed into law in September of 2014 has, in part, requirements for Title IV-E agencies that include developing policies and procedures to identify children and youth within the child welfare system who are either victims of or at risk for sex trafficking and to determine appropriate services for them.

So, today we're going to talk with a few people who are putting this into action in South Florida. The Miami CARES Project was created through a grant from the Children's Bureau and brings together twelve different community organizations and government agencies, and this includes the Florida Department of Children and Families, juvenile justice, State's Attorney's office, the Citrus Health Network, the Miami Coalition for the Homeless and others, all in partnership to serve Miami Dade County. They've built an infrastructure, developed and launched training programs, helped enforce existing legislation, all to create a coordinated child welfare system in response to trafficking of minors.

Really pleased to have three key leaders joining us with this one, Yinay Ruiz, works for Our Kids of Miami Dade County and she is the program manager for the Miami CARES Project. Dr. Kimberly McGrath is part of Citrus Health Network and she is the clinical coordinator for the CHANCE Program, which is part of the Miami CARES Project and provides therapeutic services for trafficking victims and has specific training for foster parents. And the Honorable Maria Sampedro-Iglesia, she is an associate administrative judge within the 11th Judicial Court of Florida and she presides over a specific court, it's called GRACE Court, and that's within the juvenile division and was created specifically for minors who are victims of human trafficking.

We talk about how the Miami CARES Project works, how they achieve this cross-agency collaboration, and what goes into serving the children and youth of Miami Dade County who are at risk for or victims of human trafficking. We're so glad you're joining us. It's a great example to replicate, not only for trafficking, but for cross-agency collaboration.

So my first question here and, Yinay, if you want to jump in here, talk to me about what were the really the impetus, what was the problems and issues that the CARES Project tried to address?

YINAY RUIZ [00:03:26]: Okay, so back in 2012, House Bill 99 was passed here in the State of Florida, and this bill allows minor victims of human trafficking to be deemed as dependent children in the court instead of delinquent children and giving law enforcement the discretion to either arrest or deliver the children to a short term safe house, if available, and what this did was allowing the child welfare professionals to provide services and address the needs of the children.

At the time, Our Kids of Miami Dade and Monroe didn't have a unit that would address the services needed for these children, so we decided to apply for a five year grant that would address human trafficking within the child welfare population here in Miami Dade County and that's how the Miami CARES Project was created, to be able to help and address the needs of this population.

TOM OATES [00:04:30]: So, in looking at the grant, it's not just, you know, Our Kids, it's not just the, you know, the Citrus Health Network, you've got, what, more than ten organizations and groups, talk to me about why you chose these teams or why this group was able to come together and what their significance in working together provides the project.

YINAY RUIZ [00:04:52]: When the project was first created back in 2014, the first thing we did was we became members of all of the human trafficking task forces that we had here in Miami Dade County and there were three major human trafficking task forces.

We started learning and getting to know all the key players in these task forces and who were the people that could really help the population that we served. We started creating a relationship with these organizations, so we became really close with the Juvenile Justice Center, with different local police departments, the State Attorney's Office, started working closely with the Guardian ad Litem Program, we really had, thankfully, two great providers that were providing specialized services to these victims, one of which was the main provider, which is the CHANCE Program, and you're going to hear a little bit about them later on. So, that's how we started identifying these different organizations through the taskforces that we have in our city.

TOM OATES [00:05:55]: So in doing so, let's talk a little bit about the entire program or project itself. So, how are youth then, identified and then what happens when they are identified either as victims or at risk for being victims?

YINAY RUIZ [00:06:09]: We convene multi-disciplinary staffings to be able to discuss each specific cases for these children and what we do is we try to identify who are the key players in these staffings, who are involved in the children's life? In any staffings we can have as many as ten or more participants; we have foster parents that may be working with this child, who may have important information as to the kid that can probably help us identify their high risk; the therapist from the Chance Program; we have the Guardian ad Litem foster parents, I'm sorry I said that before; the case manager. Anyone that can really provide key information.

We discuss the needs of the children, the details of their activities, what are their behaviors and by doing so, we learn so much about these children, are really able to identify whether or not the child is at high risk of being exploited. Most of the time when we identify high risk children, later on within a few months we are able to confirm their involvement and at that point we always can involve the State

Attorney's Office or any local police department that may be of any help in the investigation for these children.

TOM OATES [00:07:31]: It sounds like at this point you're able to then, once you identify, you're able to alert the right groups to get action.

YINAY RUIZ [00:07:38]: Exactly, exactly. So, and the State of Florida pretty recently, I think it was January of this year, got a screening, a human trafficking screening tool that was approved to be utilized by all of the case managers and child protective investigators, so this tool is also now used by protective investigators and case managers when they feel also that a child may be at risk of being exploited. That's another way to identify the children, that we're using; once that tool is completed it's sent to the Miami CARES Project we can convene a multi-disciplinary staffing and then discuss the findings of those tools.

TOM OATES [00:08:22]: So, once you start to work, all the other teams start to come into to play and you mentioned before so I want to bring in Dr. McGrath about the CHANCE Program. And so, where does the CHANCE Program play within this and what is it doing right now for these trafficking victims?

DR. KIM MCGRATH [00:08:40]: In 2012, when Safe Harbor was being initiated and passed, we were asked to develop, by the Department of Children and Families and our local community-based care agency Our Kids, to develop a treatment program for these youth, so at the time we developed specialized therapeutic foster care homes.

Citrus is a federally qualified health center and we've been providing therapeutic foster care services for over 20 years, so we're very familiar with working with children who have extreme behavioral and emotional needs. We have been working with these youth in our therapeutic programs for years, but we never had coordinated system response to really be able to address their needs. So, we initially started by developing specialized therapeutic foster care homes, specifically designed to meet the needs of sexually exploited youth; foster parents received 24 additional hours of training on commercial sexual exploitation; the youth are the only child placed in the home, and then we bring in the clinical wraparound services and we, very tightly, therapeutically wrap the child in the home with services.

We currently have fifteen homes operational in Miami Dade County. We quickly realized that we had many more children than we were going to be able to bring up foster homes. So, those same clinical services that wrap the child, we put them in a community response team and we'll go out and meet the child and wrap them in whatever placement that they currently live in; it could be a shelter home; it could be home with relatives; group homes; wherever it might be.

The therapeutic services that we typically provide the youth are individual therapy; family therapy; we have a life coach who is a survivor of human trafficking to provide life coaching and mentoring; group therapy, they're in a sixteen week manualized psychoeducational process group, specific for commercial sexual exploitation; and then also any other service that they might need; psychiatric, medical, we link them within our agency to all those services.

TOM OATES [00:10:46]: So let me pull on that for a little bit, and, especially when you talk about the training that you're able to give, the extra hours of training for foster parents, to specifically deal with these victims. What goes into that training, and then on the flipside how are you able to recruit families to deal with this special population?

Dr. Kim McGrath [00:11:06]: Our training has been approved by the State of Florida and our curriculum consists of what we call 'HT101', which includes precursors and triggers and signs to look for from youth that could be potentially involved in human trafficking; all of the recruitment techniques that traffickers are using to employ youth; the mental, psychological and physical effects of trauma on youth, and the role that that plays in human trafficking.

In addition to that, the second part of the training really focuses on helping our foster parents develop techniques to handle the behavioral and emotional needs that the children display, because they have such extensive histories of trauma. The University of South Florida has been our research partner since we started this program and one of the findings that has really struck us, is the amount of trauma that these youth experience prior to their exploitation. So, our foster parents are dealing with not only the immediate effects of the sexual exploitation, but also years of trauma and they really need to have the training and be able to be equipped to deal with that response.

With regard to recruitment, it has been challenging to recruit foster parents for this population, but I think that when we really focus on the victimization of youth who are commercially sexually exploited, we bring down the stigma associated with these youth and we get people to understand that they are vulnerable children who have been exploited; that they are not criminals, that they are victims and then we have folks who are more willing to work with them to get the training that they need to be able to appropriately care for them.

TOM OATES [00:12:53]: Wow, and, so we're seeing the services that are then provided in this. And you mentioned it's not necessarily come to the services, but bring the services to wherever the child is, be it in a group home, be it in a foster home, or wherever they are. And so, then again part of the entire project, there is this whole component that's involving the State Attorney's Office and the judicial system, so that brings in, of course, the GRACE Court, which is a big part of this as well, in terms of how legislation is put through this, so, Judge Sampedro-Iglesia, talk to me a little bit about why the GRACE Court came to be and what occurs there that makes it different from other juvenile courts.

HON. MARIA SAMPEDRO-IGLESIA [00:13:35]: The GRACE Court came to be because for a while we were servicing the human trafficking victims. For approximately three to four years, I was handling those cases, however, in the last few months is when it's been formalized. We wanted, first of all, to give it a name that did not have the stigma of human trafficking court, so we came up with GRACE Court, which stands for 'Growth Renewed through Acceptance, Change and Empowerment' to try and give the victims a positive twist to what they were going through.

It's different than any other court in the nation, as far as we know, because, it's not to say that other courts in the nation do not handle human trafficking victims, of course they do; however, we are under the belief that this is the only court that encompasses everything of a minor that is a victim of human trafficking. So, if she has or he has a delinquency, it will come here; if the child has a dependency, it will come here; if there's a family law case, a divorce, and the child has a component in the case, it will come here; so, it's the first court, that we know of, that really takes care of all of the facets of the family, so long as the child is, obviously, a human trafficking victim.

TOM OATES [00:14:59]: You know, you mentioned something about the name of the GRACE Court to try to take away the stigma of human trafficking, and so we see the services, we see the agencies, we see the courts; but when you talk about that stigma, there's a stigma from the outside, but then how are you guys, all three of you, how are you dealing with the stigma of the victim and trying to engage them

into accepting the services and being willing to understand that the court is actually working for them, not as much as trying to punish them?

HON. MARIA SAMPEDRO-IGLESIA [00:15:33]: Well, I think Dr. McGrath is probably the one that deals with that the most, but from my standpoint at least, when the children come into court, they have a whole team here. They have, usually their therapist comes with them; I do my very best to appoint an attorney ad litem that represents the child, so the child feels somewhat valued, feels that her voice or his voice is being heard because that attorney is representing the child; Yinay is usually here from Our Kids to lend support to the child; and it's a less adversarial proceeding than most of the cases, sometimes, it obviously gets adversarial but I think the child feels more valued.

We all make a really big deal when anything goes their way, if they came up from an 'F' in school to a 'C', it's like a really big deal; I try to talk to them one on one and Dr. McGrath, I think, can answer the rest of it because of the therapy that the children receive. It is very hard to engage them and to get them to feel that they are victims, they do not feel that they are victims and that's probably the biggest challenge we have.

TOM OATES [00:16:45]: Right.

DR. KIMBERLY MCGRATH [00:16:47]: Yeah, I think the judge answered the question wonderfully; I think with our therapists, the biggest piece for engagement has been continuity, that they're consistent; that they continue to show up, even when they're asked, maybe not to appear; they continue to be present and to offer services to the child. Whatever the child wants to work on, it does not have to be related to their trauma or their sexual exploitation. It could be that our therapists are helping youth identify employability skills or looking for jobs; whatever it takes to form that connection with the youth.

Additionally, also showing up when the children are in times of crisis; making sure that if they're sick and in the emergency room or if, unfortunately, they end up in a detention facility, that our therapists are there and continue to provide support. That continuity, I think is one of the key components of the program. So if a youth is within our, in the CHANCE program and they move, regardless of where they move, that individual therapist continues and remains their individual therapist. So, whether they move from biological family into a specialized therapeutic foster home, then maybe into a shelter placement, that therapist continues to follow that child, trying to build that engagement, trying to build that trust, so that they can address the trauma.

TOM OATES [00:18:06]: And I know something like that is really on an individual basis, but, are you seeing, you know, are your therapists, you know, coming back and saying listen, you know, we're getting breakthroughs, we're getting connection, we're starting to see that trust?

Are you seeing that, based on that kind of, and I don't know, almost I'm going to be dedicated with you no matter where you are, no matter what you go through kind of feeling that the therapists, I guess, are trying to get across to the young men and women out there?

DR. KIMBERLY MCGRATH [00:18:34]: Yeah, and, we're seeing it, anecdotally I can tell you stories that demonstrate that our kids are being bond-, are becoming bonded, that the rapport with the therapists has been established; but I think even for the therapists, the data that we're receiving from the University of South Florida has been really reinforcing because it has shown us that we've seen, across the board, significant improvements in the youth, in their runaway episodes; that we're seeing academic

achievement is improving; that their trauma symptoms are reducing; so we're seeing a significant reduction in trauma symptoms, so that research is also helping us to, kind of, redefine and reevaluate success with this population, which is so important.

Our youth are still running, there are many of them that still do, unfortunately, run away, but we're finding that they're coming back more frequently and that they're staying longer and that they're more willing to process their experiences, and they're gaining insight into what's happening in their lives when they're in these high risk situations.

TOM OATES [00:19:38]: So, and let me add a little bit more to that because we're about, you know, two years into the grant, so what are, kind of, the results and the impacts that you're seeing, you know, both from the impacts that you're seeing in being able to connect with and reach these victims, or those who are at risk; or like you mentioned, you've got fifteen families that have been trained and are resource families. What are kind of the results and impacts that you're seeing after about, you know, two years of implementing and standing up the CARES Project?

YINAY RUIZ [00:20:10]: Well, we're seeing a lot of community collaboration, that's what we're seeing. We're seeing that the agencies are more willing to work together on helping these children; we're seeing the increasing awareness on human trafficking, especially with the case management; with the Child Protective investigators, we're getting more referrals with children that they may have concerns that may be trafficked. Whereas before there was that resistance of not wanting to even talk about the possibility that the child in their caseload was a victim of human trafficking because they just didn't want to label the child and that's what we used to hear a lot, and now we're just getting more of, can we provide services to this child to ensure that they're not, they don't get trafficked; they believe more in the preventative services and so we are seeing a big improvement when it comes to awareness and people wanting to work together.

TOM OATES [00:21:09]: Let me ask you this, as we see the results and we're seeing the impacts and how the program comes to be, let me ask you at the beginning of how this program got started because the collaboration between so many agencies is intriguing. So, first off, how did you once the grant came in or even beforehand when you were applying for it, how did you achieve buy-in from so many different agencies across Miami Dade County?

YINAY RUIZ [00:21:35]: It was hard, I got to tell you, because at the beginning, you know, we didn't get that collaboration; we got a lot of resistance, and I think that the key point was to acknowledge everybody's role in the fight of human trafficking and ensuring that they knew that their role was very important, that it was different.

Every single organization has a completely different role and making them understand that if we bring everybody together with the different roles that they have in this fight, we can probably make something happen. And, it took a while for that to take place, but you know, we tried and we continued to try and I think we gained everybody's trust and that really made a difference.

TOM OATES [00:22:21]: Yeah, collaboration, that can't be written down on piece of paper and then mandated and magically it happens. How do you manage all the day-to-day communication and the collaboration between all these agencies so everyone still feels like that they have skin in the game, and they do have input.

YINAY RUIZ [00:22:39]: Like I said before they're included in the multidisciplinary staffings, we do reach out a lot to the different organizations that we work with asking for help and involve them in the cases and ask them to participate, especially in the direct contact with the victims.

So, it takes a lot of work and it's a daily struggle and we do it on a daily basis; we are constantly on the phone, we have, with the CHANCE Program, 8:00 in the morning I'm already on the phone with their therapists and their administrators, same thing with the State Attorney's office; we're in constant communication sometimes even during the weekends or at 11:00 at night, it really never stops.

TOM OATES [00:23:25]: Tireless effort, thank you guys so much for that. In putting this all together, we're talking about the barriers and how you have to almost change some minds. Your Honor, let me ask you how were you able to get buy-in and establish this really the GRACE Court within the court system; the juvenile court system itself; the State's Attorney's office and you're getting defense council and you're getting everyone to work together. Tell me about getting that buy-in on that end.

HON. MARIA SAMPEDRO-IGLESIA [00:23:55]: I think it's the only type of case that everybody has the same goal in mind. And everybody wants to have their part in saving the child. Everybody has a different role. It gets a little bit more complicated than what Yinay was speaking about because lawyers, by nature, love to argue and that sometimes is a very big challenge in court but everybody is very open everybody has a lot of communication.

The CARES Program invites them all to the multidisciplinary staffings. I am not included in those, obviously, because they talk about things about the case that I do not know yet or want to know yet; but, by the time they come to court we're all more or less on the same page.

It was difficult, at first, because many attorneys, judges, what-have-you, want to transfer any child that runs away often as a human trafficking victim. And there's a lot more identifying them as a human trafficking victim. It's taken a lot of work from our administrators, it's taken a lot of work from everybody. But we've had, really, the support of everybody we've had a lot of training on it and everybody is on board.

TOM OATES [00:25:20]: Wow, and think that after two years that you guys have seen some of the results that you guys had talked about earlier and the improvement really on the outcomes and positive outcomes. Yinay, if you were to start all over, what would you do differently? What is it that you know now that you wish you knew back then?

YINAY RUIZ [00:25:41]: Well, when it comes to human trafficking, we're always learning. I think that education part was a key component and it was much needed in our community. I think that if I was to do something differently, I would probably have started all of this much sooner than we did. I think it took way too long to start, to bring everyone together; so I really regret that we didn't do this sooner and that we didn't start working on this side of human trafficking way before than when we did.

HON. MARIA SAMPEDRO-IGLESIA [00:26:19]: She's probably right, because many of the victims are as young as 12, 13. Some of them come in when they're 17. So, it makes you wonder how long they were out there that no one was there to help them.

TOM OATES [00:26:34]: Hmm. A lot of what we're seeing as human trafficking is becoming such a, receiving such a much larger focus within the federal government and, as it goes down to local and state agencies, the recognition of it and the training and reactions really are varied across the nation.

Dr. McGrath, let me ask you, what would be your best training advice, across the board, for folks to be able to recognize and address human trafficking within child welfare and, really, across the board, law enforcement, juvenile justice, court personnel and child welfare; what's the best training advice when it comes to human trafficking?

DR. KIMBERLY MCGRATH [00:27:13]: I think the best advice is train as many people as humanly possible across settings. We need to be training our emergency room doctors to look for the physical signs and symptoms of trafficking; we need to get into the school system, we have to get our school boards and our Department of Education on board and allow us to get into then schools to start talking to our youth about human trafficking and prevention; we need to work with our hospitality staff, helping them identify victims of human trafficking and how do you respond and who do you call.

So, really the bottom line is, as many people as possible. The more we train, the more youth that we will identify.

TOM OATES [00:27:53]: And Dr. McGrath, where do you, where does, the CHANCE Project, or the CHANCE Program, where do you go to find the latest information and the latest training information regarding human trafficking?

DR. KIMBERLY MCGRATH [00:28:07]: We're constantly reading and learning. We look to Shared Hope for guidance, the Polaris Project, a lot of the national human trafficking programs; USF as our research partner, they're constantly looking to see has any new research or empirical evidence been published and sharing that information with us; there's a number of blogs, the listservs, the HEAL foundation, for example, is one that we belong to. So that we're making sure that if anything has been added to their research base, we want to know about it, so that we're well educated to take care of our youth.

TOM OATES [00:28:43]: Hmm. Guys, this has been just a great example of what can be done. One, when it comes to addressing and really preventing human trafficking. But then, also, it's a great example of a massive cross-agency collaboration. And so finally, Yinay, let me wrap this up by thinking, if you've gotta tell somebody across the country who wants to establish a similar cross-collaborative project, what's the biggest key in kind of getting everybody together?

YINAY RUIZ [00:29:14]: I think understanding what is it that their community has in place already. What is it that they're offering? Reach out to those providers, bring them to the table, give them a voice, discuss the cases with them and you'll be surprised the things you're going to learn from everyone in the community from the different organizations. I think just getting to know your community and all of the different organizations that are really passionate about helping victims of human trafficking.

DR. KIMBERLY MCGRATH [00:29:46]: If I could add something, too, I think that the state has to buy into the concept as well, starting with your leadership, so like, the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families in Florida, the Attorney General, our state attorney; they are very committed to combating human trafficking, they've created positions like within the Department of Children and Families, they now have a human trafficking director; Department of Juvenile Justice now has a human trafficking director. So, from your leadership down, we've been able to, and they have to have a commitment or a

project like this isn't going to work because it does take resources and people have to be dedicated to this project or it's not going to be successful.

TOM OATES [00:30:30]: Dr. McGrath, Yinay Ruiz, Your Honor Maria Sampedro-Iglesia, I want to thank you guys so much, not only for taking the time to spend your energy to communicate this with Child Welfare Information Gateway and all the folks listening, but also thank you guys for the work that you're doing down there in Dade County and all the work you've put through the years and tireless nights to get you to where you are today and where we can hopefully go in the future. Thank you so much!

All [00:31:01]: Thank you.

TOM OATES [00:31:05]: Now, if you head to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts, within the page for this episode you'll find links to our section containing resources and information specific to human trafficking, which includes resources from The Polaris Project, which Dr. McGrath mentioned at the end of the interview.

We also have a link to the Information Gateway Publication, "Child Welfare and Human Trafficking", now this provides an overview of the crossover between child welfare and the work across the country to prevent and respond to trafficking. There are sections in that brief that address the federal legislations and initiatives on trafficking and child welfare; there's information on victims and their needs; and examples of state and local efforts to help victims. We'll also have a link to our list of sex trafficking prevention and intervention organizations which provide information, resources and training. Now, this list includes groups like Shared Hope, which Dr. McGrath also mentioned. We'll also point you to the homepage of the new Office on Trafficking in Persons, which was recently established by the Administration for Children and Families; there you can find guidance on the legislation along with resources to help your work and services for trafficking victims.

As always, do not hesitate to contact Child Welfare Information Gateway for questions about information and tools that you're looking for to help your work in serving children, youth and families; whether its training resources, data, current state statutes or contact information for other agencies and organizations across the country. It's our job at Information Gateway to connect you to relevant and worthy information from across the continuum of child welfare. Now, you can email us at info@childwelfare.gov or head to our website, childwelfare.gov and just start a live chat.

With that, I'd like to thank Yinay Ruiz, Dr. Kimberly McGrath and Judge Mari Sampedro-Iglesia for their time, their energy and their insight. Hopefully, you've found something worthwhile from the conversation.

And if you have topics of interest that you'd like to hear about, hey, let us know. We're trying to pull out the great examples and lessons learned from agencies and organizations across the country and share it with you through the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates, thanks again for listening and we'll talk to you next time.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:33:22]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.