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Pro bono spotlight: Launching effort to help human trafficking survivors

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By Crystal Freed, The Freed Firm

The Jacksonville Bar Association and Jacksonville Area Legal Aid, in conjunction with the Jacksonville Women Lawyers Association and the Freed Firm, sponsored a Jan. 8 discussion by Martina Vandenberg of the Human Trafficking Pro Bono Legal Center.

She expanded our legal community's understanding of the legal needs of human trafficking survivors and the chasm in legal services. She not only presented to more 200 attorneys at the JBA lunch, but also to approximately 45 attorneys for three hours on the civil representation of survivors of human trafficking.

You may already know that Florida is third in the nation in instances of human trafficking, both sex and labor. Last year, the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office identified 93 victims of sex trafficking. Many of those were United States citizens.

The International Labour Organization estimates 21 million people are victims of human trafficking, yet worldwide in 2013, there were a mere 9,460 prosecutions or about 4.5 percent. Our profession must do our part to change that paltry number.

You ought to know at least these two facts. Survivors need representation in not only navigating the criminal investigation and criminal restitution issues (mandatory restitution is awarded in just 36 percent of all cases), but also tax matters, immigration, family law, landlord/tenant, expungement and civil suits, to name a few.

Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a victim of human trafficking may bring a civil action and recover attorneys' fees and damages against anyone who benefits from participation in a venture he/she "knew or should have known" was part of an overall trafficking scheme.

Since Feb. 4, a sub-group of the 45 attorneys who attended the Jan. 8 program formed the Jacksonville Human Trafficking Pro Bono Working Group.

It is a collaboration among Jacksonville Area Legal Aid, Florida Coastal School of Law and private attorneys who heed the call to represent the "cause of the defenseless or oppressed."

Thank you to Crystal Adkins, Yaima Cota, Ericka Curran, Lisa A. DiFranza, Leslie Goller, Millie Kanyar, Kathy Para, Andrea Reyes, Christina Schwing and Lindsay Swiger for being our founding members.

The goal of the Jax HT Pro Bono Group is to work hand-in-hand with law enforcement and service providers to ensure that each victim of human trafficking has a pro bono team that can effectively address all of his/her legal needs.

If you would like to be part of this working group, please feel free to come to our next meeting 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Wednesday, March 25, at Terrell Hogan.

Please contact Crystal Freed, crystal@freedfirm.com, for more information.