

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

REP. DAVE PINTO: "We're talking about human beings."

First in a two-part series.

Dave Pinto envisions a time in Minnesota when authorities fight the scourge of sex trafficking with the same vigor that they already apply to the illegal drug trade. Until then, the state representative from St. Paul will keep doing what he can to combat sexual exploitation, especially of youth.

As a freshman legislator during the 2015 session, Pinto authored a bill boosting sex-trafficking investigations statewide. The legislation, which offers \$500,000 in grants over the next two years, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and was signed into law in July.

"It's a band-aid," Pinto said recently. "It's a stopgap measure. This is just the crisis response."

When he's not at the Legislature, Pinto prosecutes domestic violence and sex trafficking cases for the Ramsey County Attorney's office. He also directs training and protocol development for Safe Harbor, the state's new system geared toward helping sexually exploited juveniles and holding accountable those who traffic and buy sex. (Ramsey County earlier received a state appropriation to train law enforcement and prosecutors about the issue.)

Recently, Pinto sat down with WATCH to share his thoughts on combatting sex-trafficking in the short- and long-term.



Rep. Dave Pinto

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Q: I'm going to start off with a quote I found from one of your recent training sessions: "Our cultural image of sex trafficking is almost as off as our cultural image of prostitution." Discuss?

A: I say that often in trainings. We put up an ad for *Pretty Woman*, and I say: "We're all pretty clear by now that that's not the reality of prostitution." Then I put up the ad for the movie *Taken*, with its imagery of kidnapping, fear and violence, of being locked in a closet. Which can be true, and yet it directs us wrongly as well.

What we're trying to do with training is get people to set aside preconceptions and often to reverse them; people think they know how a trafficking victim will act. It's sort of like a domestic violence case, but squared to cubed – that much more of it.

Q: You've made quite a mark in your first legislative session, with passage of your bill to fund sex-trafficking investigations. Are there other ways you're harnessing your experience as a prosecutor in the Legislature?

A: Any work I do in the Capitol draws deeply on my background as assistant county attorney. I certainly knew there was a lot of interest in trafficking. ... I identified a very specific need and wanted that need to get met....

At Ramsey County, we are training about 1,500 officers around the state. I'm the principal trainer. We've been to all the Indian reservations. We're also training investigators and prosecutors at conferences. The Minnesota Coalition against Sexual Assault is partnering with Ramsey County to develop a model protocol. There are 15 specific work groups, ranging from juvenile probation to public health to education.

But there is a real gap. These cases are extremely demanding. They're complicated and tough to do. People need to be trained, and there is an effort to do that. But the cases are also just time-consuming. One sergeant estimated that it took about a thousand hours for just one of his [sex trafficking] cases.

Q: Is the bill you authored about providing more resources, then?

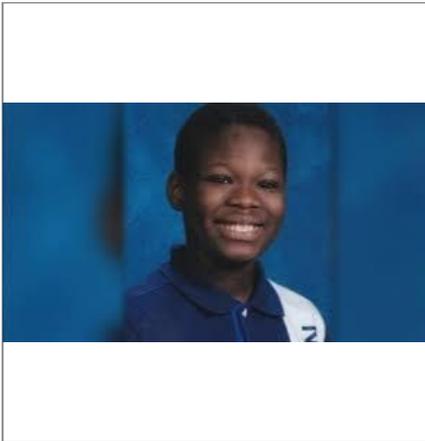
A: I sought this funding in order to get hours for cops to investigate these cases. Grants can be used for training and technical assistance. Officers could be provided to give expertise to others. It's happening now, and it could happen in a more formalized and funded way. I will say that as the training is being delivered statewide, we are increasingly developing officers around the state who do have this expertise. That's the idea; there shouldn't just be a couple cops who are being called. ... The point is, the expertise level is already rising.

"There is a real gap. These cases are extremely demanding. They're complicated and tough to do. ...One sergeant estimated that it took about a thousand hours for just one of his [sex trafficking] cases."

COURT MONITORING BULLETIN

News of WATCH's court monitoring activities

Monitor Spotlight: "In the courtroom, I had never seen agony."



Barway Collins

"Sheer agony is the only way to describe Louise's reaction when Collins admitted his guilt. Collins's most recent wife sobbed at my side as the illustrator drew the scene. "

Below is an excerpt from a recent blog post by WATCH intern Maya Bolter about the [sentencing of Pierre Collins for the murder of his son, Barway](#):

I have been at WATCH since the end of May. I have monitored Order of Protection hearings, sentencing hearings and omnibus hearings. I have seen convicted murderers, sex traffickers and domestic abusers, but nothing I have seen in the last three months can compare to the experience of witnessing the Pierre Collins sentencing and his admission of guilt in the murder of his 10-year-old son, Barway Collins.

Aug. 3 started like any other day. I walked through the skyway and went to the office. Ellen [Sackrison, WATCH's volunteer coordinator] was waiting for me with my four-page-long list of WATCH cases that were to be monitored. Ellen directed me to a courtroom where I would see plenty of sentencing hearings. I went to the [Hennepin County] Government Center and sat down. I received a text from Ellen telling me that the Pierre Collins sentencing was going to be at 10:30 ... and as a college student interested in becoming a lawyer, I'm not going to lie. I was excited. I got to the courtroom an hour early. ...

Around 10 a.m., family began walking in. Soon after, a court illustrator entered and finally the press arrived. I ended up sitting next to Barway's stepmother and three seats from Barway's biological mother, Louise.

The courtroom remained relatively somber and quiet until Collins made his guilty plea. When Collins admitted his guilt, Barway's mother fell to the floor. I have seen a lot of emotions in the courtroom: happiness, frustration, anger, sadness, remorse, but in the courtroom and in real life I had never seen agony. Sheer agony is the only way to describe Louise's reaction when Collins admitted his guilt. Collins's most recent wife sobbed by my side as the illustrator drew the scene.

Collins was found guilty of second-degree murder; the first count of premeditated murder was dismissed. He was sentenced to 40 years based on three factors: 1) Barway's age, 2) Pierre's abuse of authority as Barway's father and 3) the cruel disposal of his body.

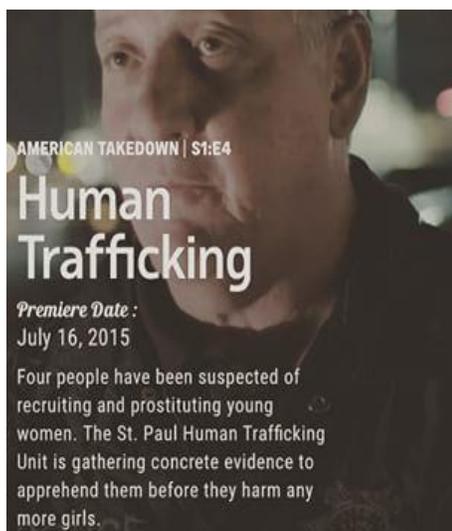
When it was time for victim impact statements, a community leader talked about the importance of closure for the family and community.

At the last second, Louise gained the strength to address the courtroom, but after stating her name, she was unable to continue. A close family friend spoke for her, saying Collins was forgiven despite the agony and despair he has caused.

We as a society have a growing obsession with the bad, the evil and its connection to the court. Our obsession with tragedy, however, did not prepare me for agony.

SEX TRAFFICKING UPDATE

Sentencing Set for Suspects in Ring



In June, WATCH detailed the arrests of five suspects in a multi-state sex trafficking ring involving minor girls. Since then, all five—**Thomas William Evans**, 25, of St. Paul, **Ishmael Jamaine Williams**, 21, of St. Paul, **Suwan Dominique Cross**, 19, of West St. Paul, **Doris Marie Keller**, 38, of St. Paul, and **Yolanda Foster**, 28, of St. Paul—have pleaded guilty to engaging in sex trafficking.

The ring was featured on a recently aired episode of "[American Takedown](#)", a new A&E series. Producers followed the St. Paul Police Department's investigation of the ring from its earliest stages through to the arrests.

Williams and Cross, who each faced trials in late July, pleaded guilty in Ramsey County District Court on Jun 19 and July 1, respectively. Williams faces an Aug. 27 sentencing date, while Cross's sentencing is scheduled for Sept. 18.

On June 12, Evans pleaded guilty in Ramsey County District Court to selling five victims ages 16 to 24. In a statement, Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said that under the agreement, the defendant acknowledged trafficking over 100 girls across 14 states and agreed to testify, "if necessary," against three remaining defendants. The agreement calls for him to serve 20 years in prison; his sentencing date is set for Aug. 25. Foster pleaded guilty a week after Evans, also offering to testify if needed. She faced a maximum prison term of 25 years, but under terms of the agreement will serve between 6½ and 9¼ years in prison. Her sentencing date is Aug. 31.

Keller pleaded guilty in May. Her sentencing is set for Aug. 21. Although she faced a maximum penalty of 25 years, prosecutors will request a sentence of 6½ years.