

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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John Choi looks for solutions

Ramsey County Attorney, Gold WATCH honoree, knows solving big problems requires more than prosecution.

By Mark Wollemann

John Choi doesn't think law enforcement alone can end domestic violence or sex trafficking in our society. But that hasn't stopped the two-term Ramsey County Attorney from doing everything he can to move the Twin Cities in that direction.

It can't just be about "providing victim services and robust prosecution and investigation," Choi says. "We have to get people thinking about prevention and get men to be more involved in the conversation about solutions."

It's Choi's work on behalf of victims, but also his message of accountability directed at men, that has led WATCH to honor Choi this year with its annual Gold WATCH Award. Choi will be honored in an April 19 presentation at The Woman's Club of Minneapolis from 5-7:00 p.m. [RSVP](#) for the event now!

Choi has been a leader in domestic violence prevention since his earliest days as St. Paul City Attorney and is now seen as a regional and national leader in the fight against sex trafficking as Ramsey County Attorney, a job he campaigned for and won in 2010.

He oversees an office with about 330 people and a [budget exceeding \\$40 million](#), and is the first Korean-born county attorney in the nation.

If someone had told him, even as recently as 2005, that one day he'd run that office, "I wouldn't have understood how that would have been possible."

Back then, Choi was an attorney, a 1995 graduate of the Hamline School of

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Ramsey County Attorney John Choi has held the position since 2011.

Gold WATCH Event

The Woman's Club of Minneapolis
410 Oak Grove St, MPLS, MN
Thursday, April 19
5:30-7 p.m.

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Law, and trying to build himself up in private practice. But after helping a competing candidate, Rafael Ortega, in the St. Paul mayoral race, he was asked to meet Mayor-elect Chris Coleman for lunch shortly after Coleman's 2005 victory.

"Chris and I got to know each other after he was on the City Council," Choi said. "He worked in downtown Minneapolis and so did I. ... When he called, I suddenly realized he wanted me to be his City Attorney."

Choi had done well in private practice and briefly worried about the pay cut he'd be taking. "But then I realized that this is probably the only time I could do this," he said. "I was, what, about 35? I didn't have any kids and so I said, 'OK, I'll do it.'"

He had always been attracted to public service, exemplified in an effort he undertook in his first year of college, in Milwaukee at Marquette University.

"I always say the best thing I've ever done in my life was when I organized over 200 of my fellow students to be tutors for at-risk kids for a middle school in Milwaukee," Choi said.

His efforts on behalf of the public have grown exponentially since. It started with the "[St. Paul Blueprint for Safety](#)," which launched during his stint as City Attorney, and it continues today with an initiative in Ramsey County that he says was inspired by WATCH.

"WATCH had done research into the outcomes of [misdemeanor-level domestic abuse in Hennepin County](#); a comparison between outcomes in the city and the suburbs," Choi said. "Minneapolis puts an extraordinary amount of effort and resources into the prosecution of domestic abuse cases and WATCH's conclusion was that those resources and that approach was what was making the difference."

Choi said he took that information, did his own small-scale study and helped build momentum around getting more resources into prosecution in Ramsey County. "We had a thing called 'continuance for dismissal (CFP),'" he said, describing the ways in which guilty pleas would be deferred and then charges would later be dismissed if the subject stayed out of trouble.

"We don't do CFPs anymore," Choi said. "We wanted to have more trials ... and fewer dismissals. We wanted to have more quality convictions.

"That's an example of working, not with WATCH in that sense, but learning from WATCH. ... They generated the idea so they get the credit for taking a look at it."

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John Choi, Ramsey County Attorney, discussing the work WATCH did in Hennepin County related to domestic violence and how it influenced his approach to the same issue in Ramsey County

"It's your neighbor. It's a colleague at work that you just don't know about."

Choi, discussing the pervasive nature of sex trafficking demand

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One of the most intractable problems Choi works on is sex trafficking. He said the issue of demand is one driven by men, and it does not come from some sick underworld that exists on the fringes of society. "It's your neighbor. It's a colleague at work that you just don't know about," he said.

He said that when undercover officers post online ads to lure potential customers who want to buy sex from girls as young as 13 or 14, the phone rings almost immediately and an eight-hour shift can sometimes involve hundreds of contacts, almost exclusively with men. "Where is that coming from?" he asked. "Why is it that there are so many men that believe that it's OK?"

Change will come, Choi said, only when we choose to raise boys who grow up to be men who respect and value women.

At many of his public appearances, Choi shares a picture of his son and daughter. "I talk about how we must think about how we raise boys to be loving and respectful," Choi said. "And how we can need to create a world where girls are valued and safe."

Lunch with Hennepin County Judge Thomas Conley

WATCH invites you to come learn more about the judicial system from the perspective of a newly appointed judge. Judge Thomas Conley was appointed by Governor Dayton in October of 2017. He received his J.D. from the University of Michigan and since then has worked for the Legal Aid Society and Stinson Leonard Street LLP.

This special event is for all WATCH volunteers and interns!

When: Friday, May 4th

Time: 12:15 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.

Where: Meet in WATCH office at 11:55 a.m.

Volunteers and interns will receive volunteer credit for attending this event.

Please, RSVP to Ellen at Ellen@WatchMN.org by Tuesday, May 1



THANK YOU!

We'd like to extend a note of gratitude to the volunteers and interns who attended the breakfast with Kris Arneson. The former Minneapolis assistant police chief shared her expertise during one of our recent WATCH learning events.

We are very excited to see more and more volunteers join us for these events. If you have anyone from the system you would like to learn from, please forward your request to the WATCH staff.

A big part of WATCH is making sure we can provide you with opportunities to learn more about the criminal justice system outside of the courtroom.

WATCH Sex trafficking report

Demand side of sex trafficking issue needs more judicial, prosecutorial attention

Addressing the demand side of sex trafficking and the role the judiciary plays in meting out punishment is the latest research report from WATCH, which will be released in April.

The nearly 30-page report, which focused on Hennepin and Ramsey counties, was produced by WATCH staff members Ellen McDaniel and Nick Cichowicz and with the generous funding support from the Otto Bremer Foundation and from contributions from WATCH supporters.

The report's key findings:

- Many discussions related to the purchasing of sex from underage girls took place in the judge's chambers instead of open court. This practice allows for the public perception that certain aspects of cases involving buyers of sex from underage girls are handled behind closed doors.
- Sentences imposed on buyers of sex from underage girls tend to be lenient.
- Prostitution Assessments are inconsistent, are well below statutory levels, or are not imposed at all.

The report recommendations included:

- Develop training and educational content focused on the need to treat these cases as serious crimes even when sting operations occur.
- Increase the knowledge level of justice partners and the general public on the role of sex trafficking in Minnesota.
- Develop a specialized court calendar dedicated to sex buyer cases.
- Institute policies so cases involving buyers of sex from underage girls are discussed in open court rather than in chambers so a buyer's conduct will not be hidden from public view.
- Reevaluate what circumstances should support acceptance of a plea to a non-felony offense or sentencing a case at a non-felony level.
- Implement a practice offering objections on the record where cases are reduced to non-felony levels, and where cases are sentenced at non-felony levels.
- Reevaluate the circumstances under which prosecutors will negotiate pleas to non-felony-level offenses.

Volunteers and interns needed

WATCH is a court monitoring and research organization based in Hennepin County. It is focused on improving the justice system's response to crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect and human trafficking so victimized women and children can rebuild their lives. Its secondary aim is to create a more informed public.

Position description: Volunteers visit courtrooms in Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Ramsey County (St. Paul) and Washington County (Stillwater) to observe and take notes on cases pertaining to violence against women and children. Volunteers fill out WATCH forms that are provided, and turn them into the WATCH office after each shift.

Our current greatest need is for volunteers in Washington and Ramsey counties. Please ask Ellen for more details about this need.

WATCH volunteer shifts are Monday through Friday, either 8:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m., or 12:45-4 p.m.

Online training sessions are required. Applicants must fill out a volunteer application, interview with the Program Manager and pass a background check.

How to apply: Please contact the Program Manager Ellen McDaniel at watchvolunteer@watchmn.org.

In the news

Congress pushes for end to legal immunity for internet companies involved in sex trafficking

A bill that would limit legal immunity for internet companies in sex-trafficking cases received overwhelming support from both the U.S. House and Senate and was waiting for the signature of President Donald Trump in late March. A story in the Wall Street Journal labeled the legislation a “rare defeat for the technology industry, which has become a powerful lobbying force in Washington in recent years.”

The bill would help prosecutors and victims go after websites that have facilitated the online sex business by removing federal immunity for those online businesses. Congress in the 1990s passed a law that gave internet companies legal immunity for what users post online. In recent years, sex trafficking lawsuits against online businesses like Backpage.com have been thrown out of court because of the immunity law that remains on the books.

Opponents of the legislation worry it will curtail free speech, but the bill’s sponsors, among others, believe that victims of sex trafficking deserve their day in court.

To read the story, [go here](#).

Native tribes explore sex trafficking solutions

In an effort to combat sex trafficking in Native American communities, several Native tribes are coming together to search for solutions, according to an article in March on the website Rewire.news. Under the leadership of the Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition and in coordination with the Justice Department’s Office of Violence Against Women, tribal officers and others fighting sex trafficking in tribal communities came together in January during a national conference in California. At that conference, Minnesota tribal police made it clear they would not wait for the federal government to institute measures to protect their community members. Supported by a two-year grant from the Minnesota Department of Health, members of a group called Tribes United Against Sex Trafficking (TRUST) are working on training tribal police, casino surveillance staff, and staff at local hotels to recognize instances of sex trafficking and help tribes create a coordinated method of responding to the crime and helping victims.

To read the story, [go here](#).



Please support WATCH!

WATCH relies solely on the kindness of strangers, and many friends like you. We do not receive any government funding and that makes us **all the more** dependent on your ongoing support. If you didn’t make a 2017 year-end gift, it’s not too late, as our fiscal year-end isn’t until June 30!

Call or email

Nick, nick@watchmn.org, to learn more about matching gifts, stock gifts or other ways you can help keep a keen eye on the courts.

Or even easier, you can donate [online-www.watchmn.org](http://www.watchmn.org)

Please support WATCH as we continue to monitor the remarkable and fragile American justice system. Over the years, we’ve been graced with donors who are both generous and curious. It’s easy to ignore the things that may not pertain directly to your life, but WATCH donors seem live by the simple tenet that we all do better when we all do better!