

United States

Background and Overview of U.S. Church Initiatives to Respond to Human Trafficking

Human trafficking and those impacted by this heinous crime have been a priority and concern of the U.S. Church for the last two decades. The Church is present and active in all arenas, from grassroots advocacy to providing specialized, immediate assistance to victims. The Church and her entities respond pastorally and as highly skilled NGOs. In most of the initiatives of the USCCB, we work collaboratively or complement our colleagues in law enforcement.

This past year, the USCCB administered a federal program to provide stabilizing and transitioning case management services to over 200 foreign-national victims of trafficking through Catholic Charities and Christian agencies across the United States. These individuals are often identified by local and federal law enforcement officers—and then referred for care and support through local task forces. Our Catholic Charities are active members in their local task forces and coalitions—responding to victims day or night—and supporting them through investigations and in some cases prosecutions. We provide stabilizing services—referrals to safe housing, medical and mental health care, legal assistance, and emotional support through investigations and trials. Many of our Catholic Charities work hand in hand with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) field offices. These collaborative relationships between Church and law enforcement have facilitated shorter response times. In New Jersey, for example, HSI victim assistant specialists reach out to Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark after raids to connect survivors of trafficking with immediate crisis intervention and counseling.

Our Catholic Charities are also sources of tips, and identify trafficking victims through their diverse array of social service programs and community partnerships. Similarly, the U.S. Catholic Health Association has launched a human trafficking interest working group, which administers resources to all Catholic

Health Association members, as well as tools and protocols that can be utilized to spot and recognize indicators of human trafficking and screen patients. These are being implemented in emergency rooms, hospitals, and rural health clinics across the United States.

The U.S. Catholic Church is leveraging the trusted access that we have with communities and individuals most at risk of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation through many of our outreach ministries. USCCB's Amistad initiative is a peer to peer education program specifically for immigrant communities. The United States not only serves as a destination country for international trafficking, but immigrants, in particular those without immigration status and permission to work, are in danger of being subjected to fraudulent recruitment and exploitation within U.S. borders. Even immigrants with legal status can be vulnerable, as many work in poorly regulated industries, including agriculture, construction, manufacturing, food services, and more.

One year ago, the USCCB hosted a weekend of intensive training and formation for thirty (30) anti-trafficking community activists from across the country. These volunteers —drawn from immigrant communities or activists with access to these communities — were equipped with the educational tools and resources necessary to build-up their community's anti-trafficking prevention and victim identification capacity. In the last year, a Deacon in Florida has educated deacons across his diocese, and expanded into neighboring dioceses. These deacons now conduct outreach in their parishes and at Catholic high schools, focusing on identification and prevention. The students collect back-packs, filled with toiletries and personal items for local police officers to provide to victims of human trafficking and women and men they encounter who are engaged in prostitution—who may well be exploited, abused, and trapped in a vicious cycle that is difficult and often impossible to escape.

One of Amistad's peer educators, a Muslim scholar and activist, recognizes the unique value that the Catholic Church and other faiths can play in building trust among immigrant communities and the police.

Last June, Mary (name has been changed for confidentiality) partnered with a local order of Catholic sisters in St. Louis, Missouri to bring over 100 Muslim and Hispanic immigrants together with county and city police chiefs to discuss why law enforcement and the community need one another to eradicate human trafficking. They also outlined steps to work together to raise public awareness and to increase incidents of reporting potential trafficking cases.

Through the Coalition of Organizations and Ministries Promoting the Abolition of Slavery at Sea (COMPASS), an anti-maritime trafficking program that bolsters collaboration and capacity among Catholic organizations responding to forced labor at sea, USCCB has formed new partnerships, expanding who we recognize as first responders. A prime example is the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) global network of port chaplains. In October, AOS devoted its 24th Global Congress to the welfare and rights of fishers and seafarers, many of whom face challenges of labor exploitation and maritime trafficking. The Congress, entitled 'Caught in the Net', enabled USCCB and COMPASS Advisory Group members to educate participants on trafficking of migrant fishers, forced labor on fishing vessels, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Port chaplains from 50 countries, including chaplains from several U.S. ports, committed to becoming engaged assets in the fight against trafficking in the commercial fishing industry, offering shelter and support to victims.

Apinya Tajit, Director of AOS in Thailand, has created an innovative model for port chaplains to enhance their role as first responders through collaboration with law enforcement. Thanks to her work with the Thai Navy and the Command Centre to Combat Illegal Fishing, she accompanies ship inspectors to spot and prosecute human and labor rights abuses on commercial fishing vessels. As AOS continues to harness its ability to serve on the front lines of victim identification and protection, we can learn from models such as Apinya's which create opportunities for law enforcement and the Church to tackle maritime trafficking together.

Along with the development of new partnerships, USCCB is embracing the challenge of long term restoration of survivors. This is something the Church can address, since we are first and foremost concerned with the whole person, and can form relationships with survivors well beyond the legal, criminal cases. This year, USCCB will provide a vital service that is too often forgotten: employment related assistance. Coined “Dignity of Work”, this program will address employment and educational-related gaps. It will prepare victims of trafficking, whether U.S. citizens or foreign nationals, to enter employment through individual coaching, skill attainment, and educational resources on topics ranging from resume building and interviewing to access to job certifications and training. Victims of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation deserve the chance to move beyond basic survival by achieving dignified employment and self-sufficiency.