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Advocates seek more city funds for human trafficking victims



Shandra Woworuntu. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez

Monsivais)



By [Gloria Pazmino](#) 5:19 a.m. | Mar. 27, 2015

The U.S. state department estimates that more than 18,000 foreign nationals are trafficked into the country every year. Thousands, including women and children, end up in New York City, where a few nonprofit service providers have struggled to keep up with the demand and provide some help.

On Friday, advocates plan to make their case for more financial support during a preliminary budget hearing before the City Council's Committee on Courts and Legal Services.

Judge Judy Harris Kluger, who helped implement the Integrated Domestic Violence Court and led the effort to open the Human Trafficking Intervention Courts in 2013 will testify before the Council.

Kluger, who served in the state court system for 25 years, now runs Sanctuary for Families, a nonprofit service provider that has assisted thousands of survivors of domestic violence, sex trafficking and gender violence.

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“We had many people coming through our courts who are charged with prostitution-related offenses and really were, by and large, in some way victims of trafficking,” Kluger said in an interview with Capital. “We should really look to provide services and support for them rather than a criminal resolution of a case.”

Despite the high number of defendants, she says, the city is still not providing adequate resources to fund the victims’ specific needs such as shelter and counseling.

“There is no additional funding attached to any of this, not for the court system, and not for the service providers,” Kluger said.

In order to raise awareness, she said, the groups are still working to redefine how most New Yorkers identify human trafficking.

“Most people think it is people brought from another country to this country under false pretenses and forced into prostitution. That exists and we see those clients as well, but the person who is being threatened by her pimp, the person whose boyfriend turns into her pimp and forces her into a life of prostitution, that’s trafficking,” Kluger said. “[That’s] why we started to look at the cases at our courts where people were charged with prostitution and realized that in many different categories or for many different reasons, they are trafficked one way or another.”

Councilman Rory Lancman, a Democrat from Queens who chairs the courts and legal services committee, which was created by Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito last year, agrees that funding is lacking.

“We want the city to provide funding for the organizations that are supporting the women in the trafficking court,” Lancman told Capital. “The whole purpose of trafficking court is to treat the women who are defendants not as defendants but as victims and give them a pathway to escape trafficking. That means providing them with services.”

Lancman said the committee will also hear from representatives from Restore, another nonprofit that had to stop accepting clients for over a month because it did not have the funds to handle the increased caseload.

“Trafficking victims are almost by definition invisible to ordinary New Yorkers, they are literally hidden away in homes or basements where they are sold for sex and they’re alone, they’re incapable of speaking for themselves,” Lancman said. “So if you have a constituency that lacks any voice whatsoever it’s not going to find the pot of gold at the end of the budget rainbow.”

Friday's hearing begins at 10 a.m. in the City Hall chambers.

A woman named Shandra Woworuntu, who arrived at Kennedy Airport from Indonesia in 2001 for what she believed would be a job in a hotel but was instead forced into the sex trade, will speak at a press conference ahead of Friday's committee hearing.



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