

Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 Training Event
Overview of Human Trafficking: A Local Perspective
October 29, 2015
Presented by: Andy Soper and NiKeidra Battle-DeBarge

In this session, Andy Soper and NiKeidra Battle-DeBarge spoke about juveniles who are neglected and abused as children and explained that they are the most likely to be ensnared into slavery by traffickers. Both speakers emphasized that parental love and involvement in their children's lives is the first line of defense to prevent victimization of children by traffickers. Another precursor to being victimized by a trafficker is living in poverty. If a youth does not have something they want or need, they will often do whatever it takes to obtain it. A trafficker will provide for the need, or claim that they will provide for it, as one common method for trapping youth.

Before even being approached by a trafficker, society and the media increase youth vulnerability by promoting sexuality, glamour, and permissiveness. Runaway, or more accurately stated "thrown away", children and teens are especially vulnerable. It is believed that *just in West Michigan*, hundreds of minors are being trafficked today, part of what is estimated to be a \$10 billion dollar industry nationwide.

According to Soper and Battle-DeBarge, medical science further explains why abused children are more likely to be victimized, and provides some insight into why traditional treatment responses are less effective with trafficking victims. When trauma occurs in a child, the amygdala—that part of the brain that controls the "fight, flight, or freeze" response—becomes overdeveloped. Brain chemicals, such as cortisol, are constantly released, causing dis-regulation of emotional responses, including irrational thinking. As a result, treatment responses that demand compliance are often not effective with this population.

Finally, it was emphasized that "connection" is needed before "correction." Empathy, relationship building, and mentoring help trafficking victims reconstruct and improve rational thinking and promotes healthy brain development. If the treatment milieu does not have these elements at its foundation, then little will change following a period of detention.