

*GRACE Court is the first unified, trauma-informed human-trafficking court in the nation. It was developed to comprehensively address all the needs of the young human-trafficking survivors who appear in the juvenile court of the 11th Judicial Circuit of Florida.*

## Florida's GRACE Court

Hon. Mari Sampedro-Iglesia, Associate Administrative Judge, Unified Children's Court and Human Trafficking Division, 11th Judicial Circuit of Florida

When I took the juvenile court bench in 2009, my goal was to help children and families. I felt so honored to be entrusted with a job that would allow me to make "forever families," as well as protect children from households that were not keeping them safe. Never would I have realized that Miami-Dade County, home for most of my life, was also home to an underground world where children as young as 11 years old were being sexually exploited and sold as property.

*"GRACE stands for Growth Renewed through Acceptance, Change and Empowerment, to remove the stigma of the term "human trafficking" and to focus instead on the goal of creating positive and promising futures for these children."*

I remember attending a judges' conference, where a speech detailed the atrocities that were occurring to victims of human trafficking. I, along with most of the judges from all over the state of Florida, were sure that the speaker was talking about the movie *Taken* or something similar. Never did any of us think that the speaker was talking about our neighborhoods.

Returning to Miami and once again hearing my dependency cases, where babies are abandoned, neglected, or abused, I still could not get out of my mind that speaker who so clearly painted a picture of a young runaway girl being approached by a man claiming to want to befriend her, then wooing her, and then eventually selling her as property.

On one of those afternoons where the speaker's words would not escape my mind, a new case came in.

A 12-year-old was brought in by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to shelter the child from her mom, who was not coping appropriately with the child's "ungovernable behaviors." I called the child for a sidebar, as I often do, and I thought, "Why does this child not look me in

the eye when I speak to her?" I slowly realized that this child's eyelids had been tattooed, as though she were an animal who had been branded. That day was the start of my quest to do my part to end the horrific crime of human trafficking.

There is no official estimate of the total number of human-trafficking victims in the United States, but the Polaris Project, a program that helps fight human trafficking, estimates that the total number of victims nationally reaches into the hundreds of thousands, including both children and adults.

Human trafficking may involve forced labor or the commercial sexual exploitation of a human being, where that person is treated as a commercial object used for sexual activity in exchange for money or other items of value. Our juvenile court has seen victims as young as age 11 being used for commercial sex.

This crime generates billions of dollars in profit to human traffickers in the United States and around the world. It is a crime that is insidious and often hard to identify because the young victims may be involved in illegal activities, such as prostitution, escort services, underground brothels or pornography, and sometimes gang activity and drug use or sales, and it can be difficult for law enforcement to determine that juvenile criminal behavior is a result of victimization rather than intent.

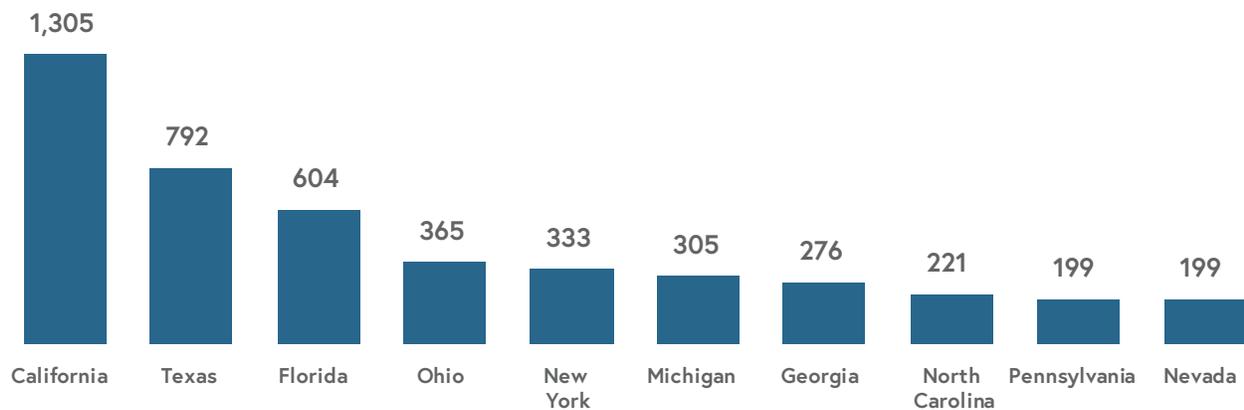
To make matters worse, these victims might not see themselves as victims, believing instead that despite repeated abuse, the trafficker is still a loving boyfriend, friend, or parent.



Florida Human Trafficking Cases Report, 2007-17:

2,940

### Human-Trafficking Cases Reported by State, 2017



Source: National Human Trafficking Hotline

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center ranks Florida third in the nation by number of calls per capita to their human-trafficking hotline. About 40 percent of the victims are minors, with an average age of 12 to 14 when they are first exploited for commercial sex.

For all these reasons, I requested that Miami-Dade County serve these children. The 11th Judicial Circuit of Florida established GRACE Court in 2016 upon my request. GRACE stands for Growth Renewed through Acceptance, Change and Empowerment, to remove the stigma of the term “human trafficking” and to focus instead on the goal of creating positive and promising futures for these children.

GRACE Court is the first known court of its kind in the United States that addresses, in a comprehensive manner, all aspects of the child’s involvement with the justice system. If a child with a dependency, delinquency, family, or substance-use disorder “Marchman” case is identified as a victim of human trafficking, that child is transferred to GRACE Court, and all those matters are heard there. The court is run by one judge trained in human trafficking. All the participants in GRACE Court are also fully trained in human trafficking. Each child is appointed an attorney ad litem, so that each child can have his or her own voice heard.

The GRACE Court approach, although at times a traditional adversarial approach, is first and foremost trauma informed. Upon entering GRACE Court, the child is evaluated, and the appropriate services are established. Hearings are allotted more time to fully address the specific and often complex needs of victims of human trafficking. Children are given stress balls to help relieve their anxiety, and therapists will accompany them in court as their support system. Therapy dogs sit with these children as they testify, and often console them when words fail.

A key component of GRACE Court is collaboration. A regular team staff meeting includes the child, the therapist, court case manager, the attorney from DCF,

and the attorney *ad litem* and guardian *ad litem*. If the case came in due to juvenile criminal activity, the state attorney and the public defender attempt to resolve the case in a way that serves the needs of the child. This team approach allows the child to better understand and be an active participant in his or her case.

#### **"Marchman Case" Definition**

*A "Marchman" case arises from a Florida statute that allows family members to petition the courts for mandatory assessment and treatment of someone who is abusing drugs or alcohol or appears to be a danger to themselves or others. (See Florida's Substance Abuse Impairment Act, Fl. Stat. Ann. § 397.301 to 397.998; also known as Hal S. Marchman Alcohol and Other Drug Services Act or Marchman Act.)*

To help my fellow juvenile court judges identify cases where the child might be a victim of human trafficking, I collaborated with DCF and a Harvard Law School student intern to create a “G.R.A.C.E Court Benchbook” (online at <https://tinyurl.com/y9dt2aem>). The benchbook includes common human-trafficking street terminology, elements most often seen in human-trafficking cases, resources and contact information, and what steps to take when a child is identified as a possible victim of human trafficking.

The benchbook provides guidance from the start, including the essential step of matching a child’s needs with the appropriate trauma-informed services from the right provider. In trauma-informed counseling, the child should receive clinical treatment primarily centered on trauma-focused care, cognitive behavioral treatment, and motivational interviewing.

The benchbook states, “When a child is accepted into G.R.A.C.E. Court, the court evaluates his or her needs and ensures that the child is referred to appropriate service providers. However, the judge cannot select which *particular* service provider the child will be referred to” (p. 19; emphasis in original). The benchbook provides an eight-page list of 45 resources to help find the right services and providers for the child. Trauma-informed services are much like those provided for all court-involved cases but with a sensitivity, awareness, and understanding of the behaviors, responses, and needs of individuals who are reacting to the trauma of trafficking.

*"Dealing with the negative effects of sexual trauma is not easy, and everyone in GRACE Court, despite their best efforts, will on many days feel more defeated than anything else."*

### Florida Human-Trafficking Cases, 2017



Source: National Human Trafficking Hotline

GRACE Court has received national recognition, and we have had judges and attorneys from Texas, Canada, and Washington, D.C., visit our court to learn about our protocol. In addition, the GRACE Court team has participated in information-sharing conference calls with jurisdictions from Colorado, Arizona, and other parts of Florida.

I have been asked to speak about human trafficking at various conferences each year, including the Annual Shared Hope JUST Conference in New Orleans. I am happy to take these opportunities to shed light on this most humiliating of crimes, which can scar victims for life.

Along with sharing our protocols, I advise judges and justice partners that the work is often difficult, and they should be prepared for these ramifications. In GRACE Court, the days can be long and draining. Unfortunately, the trauma of sexual exploitation rears its head often and in painful ways. There are many emergencies during a typical GRACE Court calendar, including defiant teenagers, contempt proceedings, frequent runaway episodes, and hearings to commit young children into residential psychiatric treatment facilities. Dealing with the negative effects of sexual trauma is not easy, and everyone in GRACE Court, despite their best efforts, will on many days feel more defeated than anything else.

Early research on outcomes shows this effort makes a difference, and its many challenges are worthwhile and valuable for both the benefit of the child as well as the administration of justice.

A progress report of a pilot study, *Citrus Helping Adolescents Negatively Impacted by Commercial Exploitation (CHANCE)*, by researchers at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute within the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida, sees early positive results. “Notable improvements are observed on the majority of outcome variables between baseline and subsequent assessment, although not all changes are statistically significant,” the progress report states. “Some outcomes that appear more resistant to change, on the other hand, include depression, anxiety, and anger.”

As promising as early results are, the work remains taxing.

It is challenging, to say the least, when you want with all your heart to help these children, and they turn around and tell you off in open court. We know that is their pain and trauma speaking—not their true selves—but it is still challenging. Parents sometimes beg the court to lock their child away to keep him or her out of the reach of traffickers. It is a hard concept for a parent to accept that no matter how much they want their child locked away, it would be unconstitutional to do so simply to keep them out of harm’s way. The most disheartening days are when the court system and the therapeutic team feel that they are accomplishing so much with a child only to see that child once again fall victim to sexual exploitation on the streets.

However, there are days that raise our spirits again. The days when a parent thanks you for returning their lost little girl, the days when a child finally realizes that her pimp does not really love her, and she thanks you for getting her out of that life. There are those days when a child gets a full scholarship to a four-year college and thanks you for helping her turn her life around. Sometimes a child thanks you for being the only one who believed in her and listened to her. Those days are well worth the long and exhausting wait, and those days are the ones that give me and my GRACE Court justice partners the will to continue our work—saving one child at a time.

