

URBAN JUSTICE CENTER



Police Chief James Tolbert
City of Flint Police Department
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Flint, MI 48502
Jtolbert@cityofflint.com

November 10, 2014

Dear Police Chief Tolbert,

I am writing to discuss the recent decision to post “the names and arrest photos of prostitution suspects” on the Flint Police Department’s Facebook wall as a deterrent for prostitution. My name is Sienna Baskin and I am Managing Director of the Sex Workers Project (SWP) at the Urban Justice Center. The Sex Workers Project is an organization which provides free legal and social services to people who work in the sex industry and victims of human trafficking, a unique intersection which allows us to serve a marginalized community that few others reach. As one of the first programs in the nation to assist survivors of human trafficking, we are recognized experts on the profound human rights abuses victims of trafficking and sex workers face, and perform research and documentation on these abuses. I have over 7 years of experience working directly with sex workers and survivors, and testifying on their behalf in local, federal and international law settings.

While we understand your urgency to address the issues facing Flint residents, there are a number of unintended consequences that we would like you to consider before instituting this practice.

Stigma and discrimination of those accused of engaging in prostitution, including trafficked persons, makes it harder for those seeking to leave the sex trade. By posting photos and names of those arrested for the crime, it will only make it harder for those individuals who seek alternative employment to do so. While a new employer may not see a sealed arrest record, posting this information on such a widely and well-trafficked site such as Facebook makes it readily available for public consumption. Making it more difficult for those involved in prostitution to find formal employment will only keep people returning to prostitution to meet their economic needs.

Trafficked persons and those who have escaped violent situations will be put in jeopardy. It is common for those leaving trafficking or domestic violence situations to turn to prostitution for a short time after escaping those situations. For those leaving trafficking situations or domestic violence, having their pictures and information so easily

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publicly available can expose these individuals to traffickers and abusers, leaving them vulnerable to further victimization and violence.

This will not deter individuals from engaging in prostitution. As a services organization, we hear on a daily basis the reasons for engaging in the sex trade, and they are overwhelmingly about meeting economic need. Publicly shaming those who have engaged in prostitution will not address the underlying reasons for their decisions, nor will it address those issues for others who are considering trading sex.

To more effectively address the reasons why people engage in prostitution, we urge you to instead encourage and support the City of Flint to:

- Create economic opportunities for those seeking living-wage work including job training programs
- Increase the availability of long-term shelter services for both young and of-age individuals, as many who engage in sexual exchange are facing homelessness and housing instability
- Engage with social service organizations to provide information, instead of arrest, for those who may be involved in prostitution

As a service organization that sees the reasons why people enter the sex trade on a daily basis, we urge you to reconsider this decision. Over the coming days, we will also be reaching out to organizations and advocates who may also be concerned with this news to contribute their perspectives as well. Many of the organizations which work with those in the sex trade have come up against the same challenges of employment, stigma and discrimination which this tactic will only exacerbate.

We hope you will reconsider this plan, which will publicly shame those only accused of a crime that is so often motivated by economic need and circumstances which can be addressed in other ways.

Thank you for your time,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sienna Baskin', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Sienna Baskin, Esq.
Managing Director, Sex Workers Project
Urban Justice Center

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