



# A Window into the Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force

U.S. V. MARIA BARRIOS CALERO AND RICARDO TOBON FLORES

## The Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Task Force to Combat Human Trafficking

is a U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) grant-funded program that brings together key partners to develop, expand, or strengthen multidisciplinary task forces to address human trafficking. With this approach, local, state, or tribal service providers; law enforcement; prosecutors; and other collaborators can:

- Increase identification of victims of trafficking,
- Access a comprehensive array of service options, and
- Seek justice for victims by implementing victim-centered and trauma-informed investigations and prosecutions.

### THE WINDOWS SERIES



Foundations Edition



Case Spotlight Edition



Disciplines Edition

## INTRODUCTION

The **Windows Series** offers insights into the ECM model and task forces with examples from the efforts of ECMs nationwide. These examples showcase different structures, successes, innovations, and ideas that:

- demonstrate a commitment to addressing serious crime and supporting victims and survivors;
- illustrate the spectrum of activities and approaches employed by the ECMs;
- share successful strategies to encourage stakeholder cooperation;
- enhance public awareness by highlighting the nature and scope of work;
- offer a behind-the-scenes look at the field and its day-to-day work to a wider audience.

The **Case Spotlight Edition** features cases investigated by ECMs, highlighting the range of scenarios as well as the different methods, partnerships and collaborative efforts that go into increasing identification of victims of all ages and of all forms of human trafficking; providing access to services; and conducting victim-centered and trauma-informed investigations to prosecute traffickers.

## A CASE OF CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING



This case spotlight highlights the work of the Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force in US v Maria Barrios Calero and Ricardo Tobon Flores, a child sex trafficking case.

# United States v. Maria Barrios Calero and Ricardo Tobon Flores



**TASK FORCE** | The Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force

**VICTIMS** | 2 minors (female)

**PERPETRATORS** | 2



**TRAFFICKING** | Child sex trafficking

**PRIMARY CHARGE** | 18 U.S. Code § 1591; Sex trafficking of children or by force, fraud or coercion

**SENTENCE** | 16 years, 6 months and 9 years, respectively

**SNAPSHOT** | Law enforcement officers from the Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force responded to a call for service, where road patrol was present. This was the result of a tip from a local motel owner in Lake Worth, Florida. The owner had observed suspicious activity involving two young females, an adult woman, and two adult men. Upon further investigation, sex trafficking was confirmed, and the traffickers were arrested on-site. Two traffickers were found to be in violation of the federal human trafficking law.

## Background

The Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force has worked hard to operationalize victim-centered multidisciplinary teamwork in every aspect of their work. In this case, the ECM model supported efforts to coordinate immediate crisis intervention. Detectives and Victim Advocates from the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office (PBSO) consistently work together to respond to cases of human trafficking. Further, ECM funding was used to offer longer-term support such as legal, education, and access to public benefits for the victims.

## Case Summary

In August 2023, a local motel owner observed suspicious activity at his establishment. The owner opened the door to a room, witnessing two young females sitting on a bed, with a condom next to them on the bed, in plain view, along with two adults, Maria Eugenia Barrios Calero and Ricardo Tobon Flores in an argument. Calero told the owner, "He didn't pay," in reference to Flores. The minor victims appeared to be scared and uncomfortable. At this point, the motel owner called the police.

Road patrol responded and contacted the Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force for immediate response. Meanwhile, Calero and Flores drove away with the two minor victims but returned shortly thereafter. All individuals were detained pending further investigation. PBSO Detectives worked at the scene to identify the victims and gather evidence confirming that Flores had attempted to engage in commercial sex with the two minor females, arranged by Calero. This meets the definition of child sex trafficking both in state and federal law. The advocate on scene was responsible for immediate crisis intervention.

PBSO Detectives discovered that Flores had paid \$200 to have sex with both underage females and had coordinated the transaction with Calero, who was to take \$50 from each girl for having sex with Flores. Both Flores and Calero were arrested at the scene, and each charged with Sex Trafficking of a Minor.

*Thank you to task force members of the Palm Beach County Trafficking Task Force for contributing case details, insights and lessons learned.*

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## COLLABORATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

### Law Enforcement

- The case was investigated by PBSO, in partnership with Homeland Security Investigations.
- PBSO Detectives and Victim Advocates worked together on scene to investigate and provide support to the victims.

- In addition to initial identification, law enforcement was able to locate one of the victims when they went missing during the investigation and coordinated with the multidisciplinary team to offer ongoing services and support.

## **Victim Services**

The primary victim service providers were the PBSO Victim Advocates, a Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Protective Investigator (CPI), a Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Palm Beach (CCDPB) caseworker, and an attorney from the Legal Aid Society of a Palm Beach County. The team worked together seamlessly to coordinate services for the children and their families. Through this collaborative effort, they were offered long-term, coordinated case management services and short and long-term legal assistance.

- Coordinated social services for education needs.
- Secured access to federal benefits (medical and mental health services).
- Provided individualized referrals and trauma-informed support throughout legal proceedings.
- Offered assistance to request Continued Presence, provided referrals to immigration attorneys, and secured the necessary documentation for T-Visa applications, requiring coordination between law enforcement, advocates, and legal service providers.

## **Prosecution**

- This case was prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida.
- The case concluded with a plea bargain, resulting in significant prison sentences for both traffickers – a 16 year, 6-month prison sentence for the primary trafficker, and a nine-year sentence by way of cooperating proffer for the buyer and trafficker – demonstrating effective coordination between investigators and prosecutors.

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## **THE ECM – WHAT MADE THIS COLLABORATION EFFECTIVE**

**True Multidisciplinary Collaboration:** The collaborative response strengthened protective factors for both the victim and family by addressing immediate safety concerns, legal advocacy, behavioral health needs, educational stability, and ongoing supportive services. Families were actively supported in navigating complex systems and empowered through access to coordinated resources and informed decision-making.

**Strong Partnerships:** Agencies contributing to this comprehensive response included the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office Victim Advocates, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Catholic Charities Diocese of Palm Beach County (CCDPB), Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), the Florida Independence Training and Education Center (FLITE Center), Community Partners of South Florida, and the Palm Beach County School District Safe Schools Program. Collectively, these partners delivered a victim-centered, strengths-based approach that improved service outcomes and supported the safety, well-being, and long-term stability of the minor victim and their family.

One of the victims went missing for several months during the legal process. Upon their return, law enforcement, advocates, and CCDPB case managers worked as a team to address immediate medical concerns. The team supported both the victim and her family during this crisis, ensuring continuity of care and services. The ECM model enabled an effective, victim-centered approach that strengthened safety and stability.

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A strong multidisciplinary response involves relevant partners at identification, throughout the course of the case, and when crisis arises, to ensure that victims have access to safety planning and the ongoing long-term support they need.
- A comprehensive approach allows partners to inform victims of all available resources and offer an array of options, including specialized support from task force partners who may provide legal assistance, access to benefits, and mental health services.
- Multidisciplinary collaboration allows for a unified, trauma-informed response that improves outcomes and contributes to successful prosecution.

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## REFERENCES

US Attorney's Office, Southern District of Florida. (2024, January 26). Lake Worth woman and man convicted of sex trafficking two young girls [Press release].

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdfl/pr/lake-worth-woman-and-man-convicted-sex-trafficking-two-young-girls>