

# A Window into the Washington Advisory Committee on Trafficking

US V. JESUS RUIZ-HERNANDEZ

## 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.

## LABOR TRAFFICKING IN LANDSCAPING



This case spotlight highlights the work of the Washington Advisory Committee on Trafficking (WashACT) in United States of America v. Jesus Ruiz-Hernandez, a labor trafficking case in the landscaping industry.

# United States v. Jesus Ruiz-Hernandez



**TASK FORCE** | The Washington Advisory Committee on Trafficking (WashACT)



**TRAFFICKING** | Labor trafficking through force, sexual assault, fraud and coercion

**VICTIMS** | 7 (2 female, 5 male)

**PERPETRATORS** | 1

**PRIMARY CHARGE** | Forced Labor (18 USC § 1589), Bringing Aliens to the United States for Financial Gain, 8 USC § 1324(a)(2)9A) and (a)(2)(B)(ii) and Money Laundering (18 USC § 1956)

**SENTENCE** | 20 years custodial sentence & \$432,776.51 in victim restitution; \$1.5M in property forfeiture

**SNAPSHOT** | Over a several year investigation, various partner agencies with WashACT, an ECM-funded human trafficking task force, investigated a labor trafficking case using a coordinated, trauma-informed response that involved identifying victims, offering services, and successfully prosecuting the lead trafficker in the case. Investigators, prosecutors, and service providers supported seven identified victims with housing, medical care, and legal assistance—ultimately enabling their participation in the successful prosecution.

Jesus Ruiz-Hernandez, owner of Brothers Landscaping on Vashon Island, WA, was found guilty by jury trial of forced labor and laundering over \$1.6 million in proceeds derived from his exploitation of undocumented workers. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison following his convictions. The Court also ordered Ruiz-Hernandez to pay \$432,776.51 in restitution to several of the victims.

## Background

Since 2004, the International Rescue Committee in Washington (IRC) and Seattle Police Department (SPD), in collaboration with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Washington (USAO), have led WashACT, a multidisciplinary task force supported by DOJ ECM funding. WashACT has provided a sustained, coordinated response to trafficking across Western Washington, addressing a steady stream of labor and sex trafficking cases while ensuring victim-centered service delivery. The Task Force's work is further supported by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), as well as additional specialized victim services providers. ECM funds have proved critical to anti-trafficking response in Western Washington. In the Brothers Landscaping case, ECM funding was used to make connections to legal services, housing, and language services, as well as support a full-time Detective at the SPD and law enforcement overtime pay.

## Case Summary

Brothers' Landscaping was a business operating on the remote Vashon Island near Seattle. Defendant Jesus Ruiz-Hernandez recruited workers from his hometown in Mexico to come to the United States to work for his landscaping company. Ruiz-Hernandez, assisted by his two brothers/unindicted co-conspirators, arranged for smugglers to bring workers across the border and transport them to Washington. Ruiz-Hernandez demanded collateral, including custodial rights or property deeds, as a condition of entry. Upon arrival, workers were subjected to debt bondage and forced to pay exorbitant fees for rent, food, and transportation, with wages withheld to service growing debts. Ruiz-Hernandez also sexually assaulted one victim on multiple occasions. A good Samaritan aided one victim in reporting via 911 to the King County Sheriff's Office in January 2018 which triggered a multi-year investigation.

The investigation was led by SPD, in partnership with HSI. The ECM-funded lead detective conducted extensive interviews over several months, aided by court certified interpreters and long-standing community trust. The lead detective also worked closely with the Assistant United States Attorney to execute search warrants, obtain business records, and obtain sworn witness statements. These interviews revealed how Ruiz-Hernandez manipulated immigration status, family ties, and financial dependency to entrap workers. Seven victims were identified and supported throughout the case.

In January 2024, following a 13-day jury trial, Ruiz-Hernandez was convicted of two counts of Forced Labor, fourteen counts related to alien harboring and transporting, and five charges related to money laundering \$1.5 million dollars of income resulting from the forced labor.

Ruiz-Hernandez was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison and ordered to pay \$432,776.51 in restitution to the two victims of forced labor. Restitution was mandatory for the trafficking charges but not awarded for other victims tied to harboring or transportation offenses. In addition, the jury found sufficient evidence to forfeit assets and properties valued in excess of \$1.5 million. The verdict ordered forfeiture of two properties for use in victim restitution.

All seven survivors now have Legal Permanent Residence or Continued Presence status, with stable housing and employment.

*Thank you to task force members of WashACT, including Megan Bruneau and Kate Crisham, for contributing case details, insights and lessons learned.*

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## COLLABORATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

### Initial Response

- An individual whom the initial survivor confided in assisted them in making an appointment with IRC. IRC facilitated the first survivor's connection with a trusted detective after they expressed interest in reporting.

### Law Enforcement and Prosecution

- There was significant interagency and investigative collaboration between law enforcement, prosecutors, and survivor advocates resulting in charges for forced labor, harboring, and immigration crimes.
- The lead detective and USAO, with the support of SPD and HSI, made a commitment to victim-centered, trauma-informed interviewing with court certified interpreters.
- After comprehensive case building, the lead detective and prosecutor prepared a well-coordinated response for takedown. SPD and federal partners simultaneously executed search warrants on properties and vehicles, identifying four additional exploited individuals. Investigators recovered 30 ledgers from the defendant's home, documenting unpaid labor and debts.

- They obtained Facebook data through a search warrant, corroborating survivor testimony and showing recruitment and exploitation patterns.
- Evidence from multiple survivors and recovered ledgers was presented to the grand jury, resulting in expanded charges

## **Victim Services**

- The nature of the services required to stabilize and support victims of human trafficking can be vast. ECM-funded partnerships allowed for real-time coordination with bilingual service providers, enhancing victim trust.
- Services were coordinated and offered by more than one provider.
  - The IRC supported victims with safe housing, medical/dental care, language services, job placement services, assistance with systems navigation and applications, and emotional support throughout the trial process.
  - A local legal services provider offered assistance.
- The first survivor had strong support from her advocate, detective and prosecutor, leading her to disclose information about additional survivors. The trust built encouraged the next two survivors to come forward and share extensive and critical evidence, leading to a superseding indictment.

## **Partnerships**

- ECM funding ensured continuity of services, including dedicated law enforcement staff and service coordination across agencies.
- Long-term coordination between SPD, HSI, and federal prosecutors ensured the collection of detailed evidence over several years.
- The task force's established relationships enabled swift, trauma-informed response and minimized retraumatization for survivors.

## **Key Partners**

- IRC provided individualized case management, helped survivors stabilize, and prepared them to participate in the case. IRC focused on supporting survivors with setting long-term career and life goals and accessing housing, healthcare, benefits, transportation, and food resources. The IRC advocates were all bilingual and able to communicate with survivors in their native language.
- SPD provided trauma-informed interview spaces and language access, applied for Continued Presence, and led investigations, including interviews and corroborating evidence.

- The USAO of the Western District of Washington led evidence and report review, obtaining business records, preparing extensive search warrants, grand jury utilization, trial preparation, witness coordination, and prosecution.
- A local provider offered legal assistance, supported law enforcement interviews, and ensured survivor needs were met in alignment with the progression of the criminal case.

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

The success of this long-term labor trafficking case is directly attributed to close, victim-centered collaboration between law enforcement and the legal and social services providers working with the victims. These partnerships secured the victims' presence in the United States and facilitated their testimony at key stages of the prosecution.

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## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Early involvement of trauma-informed service providers builds trust and enables long-term victim engagement.
- Advocates obtained informed consent from survivors and provided space and options throughout the investigation, including the opportunity to approve interpreters or request alternatives.
- Dedicated ECM-funded law enforcement positions enhance task force continuity and capacity.
- Agencies maintained clear boundaries and clear role delineation.
- Trauma-informed spaces were prioritized to increase survivor comfort.
- Multi-agency collaboration is essential in navigating long-term investigations and protecting survivor rights.
- The investigation benefited from a commitment to not pressure survivors to participate before they were ready.
- Advocates and attorneys ensured consistent trial support and presence.
- Language access was supported through bilingual staff and court-certified interpreters.
- Trust built with the first survivor was critical to building trust with two others, which ultimately strengthened the case.
- Economic exploitation often includes coercive debt cycles and non-physical control tactics—requiring cross-sector expertise to identify and dismantle.

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## REFERENCES

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington. (2024, January 24). Owner of Vashon Island Landscaping Company Convicted of Human Trafficking, Labor Trafficking, and Money Laundering Felonies. [Press release] <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdwa/pr/owner-vashon-island-landscaping-company-convicted-human-trafficking-labor-trafficking>

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