



PRESS RELEASE

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IIconn Receives Award from U.S. Attorney for Work on Perlitz Case

New Haven (01/20/12) – THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CONNECTICUT (IICONN)'S Project Rescue was awarded a 2011 U.S. Attorney's Office award for their efforts in the case of US. v. Douglas Perlitz. The award recognizes the trauma-informed support that IIconn provided to six Haitian victim-witnesses during their weeklong stay to testify against Perlitz in December 2010..

A former Connecticut resident, Douglas Perlitz founded The Haiti Fund in 1997 that established Project Pierre Toussaint (PPT), a boarding school for homeless boys in Haiti. The fund's board of directors was based in Connecticut and regularly raised funds for its project. Ten years later, allegations surfaced accusing Perlitz of sexually exploiting eighteen or more boys in his care 1998 through 2008. In his role as director of PPT, he obliged his pupils, as young as six, to engage in sex acts in exchange for food, shelter, and other benefits, including cash, cell phones, electronics, shoes and clothes. Those who refused to comply with Perlitz's sexual demands were threatened and forced to return to life on the streets.

Project Rescue's director Danelle Ragoonanan-Storph explains that witnesses' background of broken trust played into the agency's hosting strategy. "Creating a safe, calm, respectful environment were our top priorities during the week the six men were here to testify. We worked long days to provide services that respected the dignity of the witnesses and that would help advance their healing process. We are very grateful to the U.S. Attorney, David Fein, for recognizing the importance of emotionally supporting victims while providing for their basic human needs.." These needs included winter clothing, meals, hygiene products and access to a non-traditional form of movement therapy to help with the intense stress of testifying before their aggressor.

"What was most unexpected was the many ways they were selfless in their courage and in their concern for the other victims still in Haiti," continues Ragoonanan-Storph. In response, Project Rescue prepared sixteen care packages of clothing and toiletries for those victims who could not come to testify. After the guilty verdict came down awarding each victim a portion of The Haiti Fund's remaining assets, they shared the amount with the unrepresented victims.

According to federal legislation, human trafficking involves the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of forced labor or services through means of force, fraud, or coercion. Sex trafficking occurs when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the person induced to perform such acts is under the age of 18. Human trafficking often involves severe violence to its victims. Ragoonanan-Storph stresses that although this case involved exploitation that occurred overseas, Project Rescue is very active in providing services to victims of human trafficking being identified every year in Connecticut She believes that the Perlitz case is an example of effective law enforcement and proves that there is a venue to protect human rights locally.

About the International Institute of Connecticut (IIconn)

The International Institute of Connecticut (IIconn) is a statewide non-profit agency dedicated to the needs of immigrants, refugees, and foreign born victims of serious crimes, including human trafficking and domestic violence. It has four permanent offices located in Bridgeport, Stamford, Derby and Hartford, and also maintains outreach operations throughout the state of Connecticut. IIconn's broad services range from helping new arrivals meet their most basic needs including adequate food and shelter, to English classes, refugee resettlement, job training, job placement, counseling, translation / interpretation, family reunification, advocacy and legal assistance. IIconn is dedicated to promoting full civic participation in Connecticut's culturally diverse communities.

Project Rescue, the Anti-Human Trafficking Program at IICONN is a program to serve victims of human trafficking and raise awareness about the issue of trafficking in persons. In cooperation with the U.S. Attorney's Office and law enforcement, Project Rescue was established to serve trafficking victims through comprehensive case management, advocacy, immigration legal aid, and referrals to community service providers. It is primarily funded under a grant from the Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime. IICONN co-chairs the Connecticut Coalition Against Trafficking, and sits on the Federal Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons Investigative Task Force (STOP-IT) and the State of Connecticut Trafficking in Persons Council (pending re-appointment).

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