

Exclusive Interview

Journalist Diana Scimone recently spoke with Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, director of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking of Persons.



Diana Scimone: You recently started working at the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking of Persons. What's your vision as the new director?

Ambassador CdeBaca: One of the main things we're trying to do, speaking for myself, Secretary Hillary Clinton, and President Barack Obama, is to have a sustained anti-trafficking movement that harnesses all the voices of folks moved to do something about modern-day slavery-and then take that to the next level.

In January 2001, the work of the Clinton administration was continued and intensified by the Bush administration. That's one of the things we're hoping to continue-to harness that activity and commitment on the part of civil society. That can be human rights groups, mission groups, folks in the community, worker organizers, women's groups-all of those groups, each of which brings something to the table. At the end of the day, we're talking sustainability and intensity.

DS: How have things changed since you first got involved?

LCdB: I think about the first case I did in Florida in the mid 1990s as a civil rights prosecutor. To the degree that we even knew about this thing called human trafficking, we could have had a meeting of all the people who were involved in the fight back then and met in a minivan. Maybe a Volkswagen.

Today there is this [understanding] that folks in the non-government sector are just as important to the fight as any dedicated cop or prosecutor. It really has grown past those of

us who started working on it [15 years ago]. We're in a good position now, that we're able to tap into the real energy coming not from people who've been working at this for a decade, but people who are just getting involved in the fight.

DS: What do you tell people who hear the horror stories and want to do something about it, but say, "I can't rescue a child from a brothel. What can I possibly do to help?"

LCdB: A lot of people sell themselves short. They say, "I'm not the attorney general, so I can't put together a task force in my state." You can do a lot more than you think. You can go to the AG or your mayor, and say, "Our state should be addressing the root causes of trafficking in our borders. We should be doing something to reduce the demand. We should be helping the newly arrived and vulnerable immigrants, or the street people who are written off as disposable. We not only want, but we demand that trafficking victims be treated professionally."

That's when you start seeing shelters go up, when you  start seeing victims being helped and put into places where they can receive help.

There are lots of different ways to get engaged on a grassroots level. Put together a house party and ask people to bring clothes they're no longer wearing so that women and men who are rescued can have something to wear for a job interview. When someone flees through a window, they don't have anything but the clothes the traffickers were making them wear. Having a sweater and a decent skirt can make a difference to them.

DS: When you and Secretary of State Clinton released department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), you said you'd like to add a 4th "P" to the categories of fighting trafficking-partnership. [The other Ps are prosecution, protection, and prevention.] What was behind that suggestion?

LCdeB: A lot of countries see the TIP Report as the U.S. coming to them and saying how bad they are. We wanted to make it very clear by releasing the U.S. government self assessment at the same time that we have people still in bondage right here in the U.S. They're in our agricultural fields; they're in prostitution; they're in many places.

We realize we have to work in partnership with those around the world who are working to stop human trafficking. When President Obama was in Ghana recently, he gave a speech to the parliament and talked about trafficking heroes. He mentioned a journalist in that country who went undercover and helped bring down a trafficking ring.

While the president was in Ghana, I was in Nigeria meeting with cops who work to stop trafficking and with nuns who operate a shelter for trafficking victims. When they heard the president speak, even though he was talking about what was happening in a different country, they felt it was recognizing what they are doing and how hard they are working.

These are the trafficking heroes and we want to work in partnership with them and others who know their own affected populations.