

## Institute of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas was formed in 1991 when communities in the US, Central and South America, the Philippines, Guam and Caribbean came together. It has since configured as six Geographic Communities namely:

1. Northeast Community
2. Mid-Atlantic Community
3. NyPPaW Community (New York, Pennsylvania and Pacific West Community)
4. South Central Community
5. West Midwest Community
6. CCASA Community (Caribbean, Central America and South America Community)

As the sisters moved into the 21st century the cry of the poor was heard anew in the growing reality of human trafficking and its complex networks. Each of the Communities faces this reality with a special concern for the women and children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation and labour.

The Institute Leadership Team (ILT) appoints personnel to guide and assist the sisters in discernment towards appropriate action in addressing to-day's needs throughout their Community. Sisters at the local level interpret with compassion, the Institute's guidelines against the backdrop of the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy for our times.

While there are many long established ministries related to Education, Health Care and Social Services flourishing, the Institute Justice Team (IJT) also takes initiatives and works in partnership with other groups in addressing the needs of trafficked people, of survivors of trafficking, with a special emphasis on vulnerable children, e. g:

1. Mercy Investment Services (MIS), [www.mercyinvestmentservices.org](http://www.mercyinvestmentservices.org) a ministry of the Institute, engages corporations in human trafficking prevention through spearheading an Anti-trafficking Programme in the hospitality, tourism [www.ecpat-us.org](http://www.ecpat-us.org) and trucking sectors [www.truckersagainsttrafficking.org](http://www.truckersagainsttrafficking.org)
2. Mercy sisters work in partnership with United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) and U.S. Sisters against Human Trafficking [www.bakhitainitiative.com/u-s-catholic-sisters-against-human-trafficking](http://www.bakhitainitiative.com/u-s-catholic-sisters-against-human-trafficking), to raise awareness on human trafficking and on how to identify potential human trafficking victims.
3. Communities contribute financially to raising awareness of trafficking locally and at national level.

The Institute Justice Team co-sponsored a human trafficking conference, IGNITE: Sparking Action against Sex Trafficking, held in St Louis on in 2014. Its focus was "to engage, educate and empower a diverse group of supporters and stakeholders in the common cause of combating sex trafficking." The conference was attended by Mercy sisters from the Institute's Communities, professionals from law enforcement, medicine, education, faith-based and community groups. Three women, survivors of human trafficking, helped participants understand what it really meant to be a victim. Jeanne C, Justice Advocate from WMW Community, reflected: *"I am always amazed when I interact with survivors, amazed by their courage and tenacity to make something whole and good out of the evil they have endured."* Accommodation was in hotels in the locality, that are signatories to the 'Meeting Planners' Code of Conduct' [www.thecode.org](http://www.thecode.org) of ECPAT-USA for the protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation.

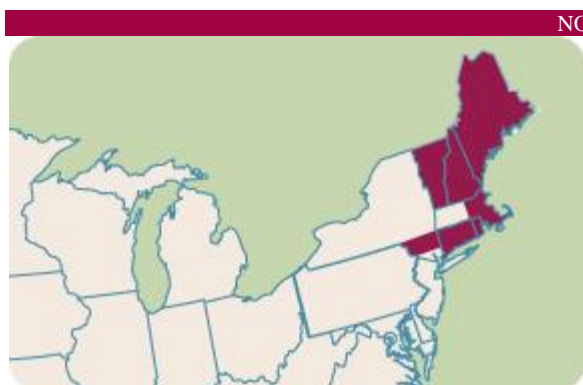
At Legislative Level the Leadership Justice Team develops Voter Guides at election times that also helps promote the Institute's Critical Concerns (earth, non-violence, women, anti-racism, and immigration) and the issue of human trafficking is addressed in various sections. Currently the IJT works to advance positive legislation that helps serve human trafficking survivors.

The Institute, along with many faith partners, strongly advocated for and prevented the repeal or alteration of the *Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008*. This action was taken due to the influx of unaccompanied migrant children coming to the U.S. from Central America and to the political reaction to repeal the law which was designed to help children fleeing potential human trafficking situations. The ILT sent a letter directly to President Obama on behalf of these vulnerable

young people and children and also contributed to the letter sent to the president from the many partners in the Inter-faith community.

Working to eradicate human trafficking is a top priority for the Institute's Geographic Communities

## Geographic Communities within the Institute of Sisters of Mercy in the Americas



with 620 sisters and 410 associates

1. **NORTHEAST COMMUNITY**—serving primarily in Albany, New York State; Connecticut; New Hampshire; Maine; Rhode Island; and Vermont

Following consultation with the Sisters their Justice Council decided to focus together on human trafficking, knowing that they could make a bigger impact if they worked on one issue. They explored the possibility of taking a corporate stand. Why a corporate stand? When a Community has studied an issue and affirmed a position, then it is possible for an individual to speak in the name of the Community, and not just in her own name. In this way, each sister in the community can feel a part of all the actions taken.

The process of arriving at an agreed corporate position entailed five weeks of education on the issue of human trafficking, followed by a poll taken among the sisters, associates and co-workers where the majority voted in favour of this corporate position on human trafficking: "Having listened deeply to the God who speaks in each of us we commit ourselves to address the following challenges: to educate about root causes...to advocate for policies...to minister to survivors...to use our influence as consumers and investors...to collaborate with others". This corporate pledge was adopted on 3 March 2014 [www.mercyne.org/Justice/NE-corporate\\_stand\\_trafficking\\_2014](http://www.mercyne.org/Justice/NE-corporate_stand_trafficking_2014), followed by a practical plan of action being developed to address human trafficking by NE Community.

To this end the sisters in Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine and Albany, New York, are collaborating on raising awareness with local Task Forces or Coalitions on Human Trafficking in their areas. They provide outreach in schools, colleges, hospitals, faith-communities and more. Educating staff, alumni, students, and hospital personnel is part of that outreach.

In New Hampshire and Rhode Island sisters participate in local conferences on human trafficking. Individual sisters support survivors of human trafficking or women formerly caught in prostitution who wish to take part in mainstream life. Sisters in NY also participated in a gathering at a busy corner in Albany to protest against human trafficking. Sisters in Maine are collaborating with the Good Shepherd Sisters who have opened a house for women who have been trafficked. **Ref**

At state level, sisters advocate for more appropriate laws for victims/survivors, and for the state to implement tougher laws against traffickers. Work is ongoing on the challenge facing girls who are aging out of state group homes and becoming more vulnerable to human trafficking.



with 900 sisters and 970 associates

## 2. **MID-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY** – serving primarily in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey

### **Inc introduction...**

- Sisters are working with the Catholic Coalition for Justice and Peace comprising 17 (area) congregations of woman religious, plus Augustinian priests.
- participating in the Coalition's support for the safe house, Dawn's Place, located in Philadelphia
- attend Annual Education days sponsored by the Franciscans
- are active members of the New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia local groups
- provide workshops for schools including faculty, staff, students, and parents
- provide resources on human trafficking for Mercy Ministries as requested
- encourage advocacy through sign-on letters/petitions, etc. in the name of the MA Community.

## NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, PACIFIC WEST

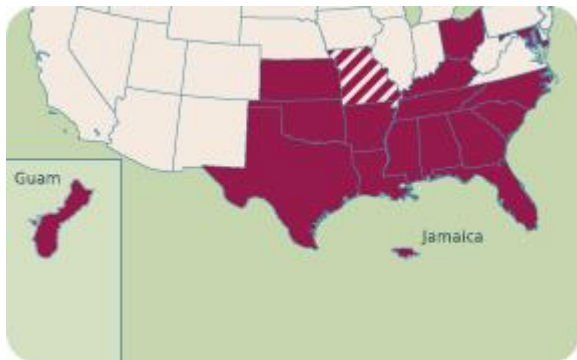


with 420 sisters and 400 associates

## 3. **NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, AND PACIFIC WEST COMMUNITY (NyPPaW)** formed from Buffalo and Rorchester, New York state; Erie and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and the Philippines

NyPPaW has a Pacific West community in the Philippines, founded in 1954 from Buffalo. Currently there are over 40 sisters in the Mindanao, Philippines community. During the Yolanda typhoon the sisters suffered intensely with the people. Funding and other donations from the NyPPaW Community were forwarded to the sisters to 'be dispensed equitably among the suffering people.' This gave the local sisters courage to keep going, knowing that they were not alone in such unprecedented times. The sisters were among the many people who feared that orphaned young people and children would be snatched away by traffickers and channeled into sexual exploitation and sex trafficking situations, and they worked with others to prevent this. During the visit of Pope Francis to the Philippines in January 2015 a number of Mercy sisters, representing religious of various dioceses went to Tacloban to meet the Pope. During the liturgy a young homeless girl asked the Pope "Why do children have to suffer?" Sisters experienced the moving exchange between the two of them which touched hearts worldwide.

On 30 September 2014 Mercy sisters in Rochester NY collaborated with the Sisters of St Joseph and Catholic Family Centre, to host and sponsor an Anti-Human Trafficking Awareness Event on the theme: "Awareness is the first step in engaging people to DO SOMETHING" with a special focus on child sex trafficking. Participants came from diverse walks of life and many Mercy sisters attended.

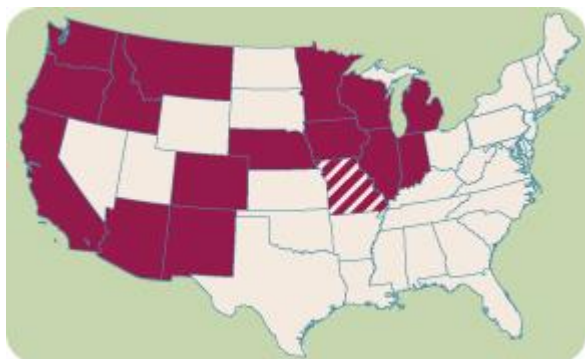


with 570 sisters and 740 associates

4. **SOUTH CENTRAL COMMUNITY** spans a broad geographic area, across 18 states. It extends into Maryland, Ohio and Missouri to the north; to Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana to the south; to Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas to the west; and also includes U.S. Territory of Guam, and the nation of Jamaica.

This vast area has a richness of cultures and opportunities. Opposing Human Trafficking has opened up ministries to a multiplicity of needs associated with human slavery. Mercy sisters in Baltimore collaborate with other religious congregations in the 'Asylee Women Enterprise', which provides a safe haven for asylum seekers. There the sisters encounter survivors of human trafficking on a regular basis. This enterprise provides housing for women and also enables them to participate in education, to engage in social activity and to learn new skills. The Sisters Co-op enables these marginalised women to earn a small stipend while awaiting their papers to be processed.

## WEST MIDWEST



with 650 sisters and 600 associates

5. **WEST MIDWEST COMMUNITY (WMW)** has facilities in Omaha-Nebraska; Chicago-Illinois; Detroit-Michigan; Cedar Rapids-Iowa; and Burlingame and Auburn-California. In addition to sisters who live in these cities, sisters and associates also live and serve in 32 other cities and four countries.

Sisters, associates and their co-workers provide numerous services to many who suffer from poverty, homelessness, and lack of education. Areas of poverty often provide the seed bed for human trafficking and ministries alleviate poverty contribute to bringing an end to human trafficking. Sisters in WMW Community minister to victims and survivors while also working in collaboration and in partnership with others. Sister Jeanne C... first became aware of the horror of HT while working with a not-for-profit women's group in Kansas City, Missouri, resulting in her devoting her ministry to helping victims and survivors of HT, advocating on their behalf and educating the public on this form of slavery. Later she was invited to become a member of the Coalition against Human Trafficking, established by U.S. District Attorney's Office in the Kansas City. She is also the link person for WMW Community with U.S. Catholic Sisters against Human Trafficking <http://www.sistersagainstrafficking.org/> and her current focus there is the development of educational modules which are available on [www.bakhitainitiative.com/u-s-catholic-sisters-against-human-trafficking](http://www.bakhitainitiative.com/u-s-catholic-sisters-against-human-trafficking). She takes part in advocacy groups for legislation to urgently address human trafficking issues. With other sisters she has visited U.S. Congress to emphasise the urgency of introducing legislation that reduces the demand for trafficked persons. Jeanne networks extensively with the sisters and various other sectors of the Anti-Trafficking Movement.

Other sisters from the WMW Community are also engaged at local and state level, in efforts to help bring an end to HT. Among them are: Therese Randolph rsm, is the contact sister for the Northern California Coalition against Human Trafficking <http://www.ncatcoalition.org/> Recently she shared the disturbing fact that: *"The average age that young people are seduced into sex trafficking is 13 or 14. It is happening in our schools, and on our streets. It is everywhere."*; Emily Devine rsm, an affiliate of the Iowa Network against Human Trafficking [www.iowanah.org/](http://www.iowanah.org/) is also the founder of Sisters and Brothers Collaborating Against Human Trafficking. Along with students and members of the community who work in the medical industry and criminal justice field, Sister Emily disperses information to hotels and truckers [www.truckersagainsttrafficking.org](http://www.truckersagainsttrafficking.org) Reflecting on their common ministry to opposed HT Emily says: *"I don't doubt we will be able to make a difference, but we have a long way to go."* Donna Ryan ministers with the Director of the Justice Project <http://justiceprojectkc.org/> which assists survivors of domestic trafficking and women who are at various stages of escaping 'life on the streets' in Kansas City MO. She provides emotional and spiritual support as well as helping to find needed resources and solutions to daily practical problems.

#### CARIBBEAN, CENTRAL AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA



with 70 sisters and 220 associates

**6. CARIBBEAN, CENTRAL AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA COMMUNITY (CCASA)** serving in eight countries: Argentina, Belize, Chile, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Panama and Peru.

In forming one Community in the Institute, the diversity in each country becomes a richness for the CCASA sisters who continue to serve needy and vulnerable women and children and focus also on problems arising from violence and on issues of trafficking of persons. Sisters participated in training workshops organized through the International Network of Consecrated Life against Human Trafficking <http://www.talithakum.info/index.php?sez=1&sotsez=2&lang=3>, in collaboration with the International Organization of Migration.

**FROM ARGENTINA:** Sisters and members of a local women's and children's centre, in a poor barrio of Clorinda city, co-sponsored a workshop that resulted in 150 people signing a declaration promising to combat the trafficking of persons. The city sits on the trafficking route connecting Paraguay, with Buenos Aires, locations in Argentina and beyond. Deborah W rsm, Estela Gomez, and others concerned about human trafficking, prepared posters and fliers to distribute at border crossing sites. Deborah and Estela crossed over to Asunción, Paraguay, to consult with the municipal agency that handles problems of trafficking <http://www.sistersofmercy.org/blog/2011/08/29/mercy-joins-anti-trafficking-efforts-in-argentina/>. Work against HT is ongoing. To commemorate the First International Day against the Trafficking of Persons, 30 July 2014, a television spot was prepared by sisters and their colleagues and was seen on YouTube. In addition, the women and the youth group joined the march against the trafficking of persons to the Plaza of Clorinda, accompanied by their band "Murga", performing street music with social and protest themes. Ana Marie S, ministering in mining and fracking areas, reflected on her experience with a local case of human trafficking. With prayers, reflection and fears she lodged a complaint, a 'denouncement', which was taken seriously and led to other investigations. Sister Ana concluded: *"It was a grain of sand, not sought, but it sought me-it was a matter of listening, seeing and allowing the Light of Mercy to guide our actions."* (CCASA Newsletter)

**FROM BELIZE:** Sisters work in education where awareness of HT is raised. Sr. Leonor F. represented the CCASA Community at a meeting of religious leaders in Costa Rica. Networking among these religious groups and others will have its own impact on raising anti-trafficking actions to be taken by CCASA Community members at national levels.



**FROM GUYANA :** Judith S. rsm and sisters from Guyana invited Mercy Associates, administrators from Mercy Ministries, other Religious Congregations, the Bishop, members of the diplomatic community, and friends to a Conference on Human Trafficking in November 2013 at the Mercy Hospital in Georgetown. The guest speaker, Ms. Simona Broomes, founder and president of the Guyana Women Miners Organization (GWMO) and a TIP 2013 Hero Reward recipient, described her experiences and noted that trafficking is widespread in Guyana, but confronting it poses difficult and serious challenges. A list of creative ideas for action emerged from group discussions. Dozens of participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, pledged to voluntarily assist in any way they can, including using their talent and resources, to confront and reduce the critical issue of human trafficking in Guyana. The sisters agreed to guide the follow-up and help develop plans to ensure, as far as possible, that the ideas, agreed upon for action, are implemented. (First Steps in Guyana CCASA Newsletter) Work is ongoing since that first meeting and in 2015 a new centre was opened in Georgetown offering support and care to victims and survivors of human trafficking.

<http://www.kaiteurnewsonline.com/2014/10/05/devoted-to-works-of-mercy-and-social-justice/>

**FROM HONDURAS:** Sisters are responding to a significant rise in human rights abuses since the June 2009 coup that removed a democratically elected president, resulting in an upsurge in violence and militarisation of society. This impacted all the inhabitants, among them trafficked women, who are deprived of many of their basic human rights. The crisis on the U.S-Mexican border involving an influx of unaccompanied minors to the U.S, highlights the situation of extreme violence.

Recently Sisters, in partnership with the Society of Friends (Quakers), organised a speaking tour to six U.S. cities to highlight the disregard for basic human rights in Honduras. The sisters hosted and participated in related town hall gatherings, in local community meetings and teleconferences with Aida Leticia Gonzalez, a Mercy Associate from Honduras. Aida is the administrative director of Mercy Dreamweavers ministry in San Pedro Sula, who spoke about her first-hand experiences of the human rights crisis in Honduras

<https://paxchristiusa.org/tag/mercy-dreamweavers/>. Mercy Dreamweavers work with impoverished women throughout the region, many of whom have been trafficked and 'discarded'.

A Mercy delegation from the U.S. also visited Honduras and upon their return, worked with other human rights defenders to urge Congress and the State Department to withhold assistance to Honduran security forces until respect for human rights and the rule of law are restored. Subsequently the group sent a strong letter related to the above critical issues to President Obama.

<https://hondurasaccompanimentproject.wordpress.com/2016/02/06/proah-accompanies-delegation-of-sisters-of-mercy-to-honduras/> tells of a more recent delegation.

**From PANAMA** Sister Dina A. writes: Human trafficking "has been very well hidden, or simply, it is so regular and normal, that it has become very common and no one is surprised." It has a long history in Panama, partially due to the U.S. military presence which ensures that "all U.S. military levels have 'entertainment' in the military bases, bars, brothels and prostitution houses." As a strategic global connection point for immigration and many illicit activities, it is of little wonder that Panama is likewise a strategic point for HT and sexual exploitation. In November 2011, HT was declared a crime in Panama, yet only two cases of human trafficking for sexual exploitation have been investigated and only one has gone to trial. On 28 March 2014, a trafficking network of five persons was condemned for bringing Colombian and Dominican women to Panama for sexual exploitation and money laundering. This was a first in Panama. Sister Dina concludes: "We have an enormous task to sensitize and educate the population about this scourge. It is necessary to break the silence and take action against this indifference... You and I have a monumental task; let us start today!" (CCASA Newsletter 2014)

By networking, collaborating and partnership the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, through the sisters, associates and partners in ministry in their geographical Communities, are working to bring their anti-trafficking work to a new level of involvement and commitment that supports the needs of victims and survivors of 21st century slavery.

