



## Transcript: Justice Matters— Saving Drug-Endangered Children, Part 1: An Interview With Commander Lori Moriarty

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, Rebecca Rose, BJA Policy Advisor, is joined by Commander Lori Moriarty, Senior Vice President of Education and Outreach with the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children (National DEC). In part 1 of this interview, Commander Moriarty talks about the crucial role law enforcement officers play in drug-endangered children cases.

**Rebecca Rose:** Hello, this is Rebecca Rose and I'm a Policy Advisor with the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Today, we are sitting down with Lori Moriarty, Senior Vice President of Education and Outreach with the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children. Commander Lori Moriarty began her career in law enforcement in Colorado where she held numerous positions to include a child-abuse investigator and went on to serve as the commander of the North Metro Task Force, which is a multi-jurisdictional undercover drug unit in Adams and Brimfield Counties just north of Denver, Colorado. She has appeared on ABC News' 20/20, Fox National News, MSNBC, CNN, National Public Radio, Colorado Public Radio, and PBS [Public Broadcasting System] in an effort to educate citizens of the hazards of methamphetamine [meth] drug labs, marijuana grow operations, and other illicit drug activity and the effects on children living in these dangerous drug environments. In her current role, Commander Moriarty has been involved in training tens of thousands of professionals across the nation on the plight of drug-endangered children.

[Lori], can you tell us a little bit more about your career and how you became involved in the drug-endangered children efforts?

**Commander Lori Moriarty:** Actually, when I was in law enforcement. I did 20 years in law enforcement, and as you mentioned, a couple of my years were [spent as] an investigator with child abuse cases and then later in my career I became a commander of an undercover drug unit. And what was interesting for me is even in that same career of law enforcement, as a child abuse investigator, I missed the part of the primary reason for the abuse and neglect being illegal substances or substance abuse in a home. Then when I went to command an undercover drug unit, I was totally dealing with

the illegal substances and the abuse in the home and missed the child abuse.

And so there was a particular case that was the "Aha" moment for me, when we went to a meth lab and our entire team was all geared up for the hazards of the lab and decontamination. And when we went into the home, we were all wearing self-contained breathing apparatuses and we were going to be in there for maybe 8 hours, and then when we turned the corner during the raid, we found a 9-month old sitting on the floor of the room where a meth lab was with a diaper and it was the—you know, if a picture could paint a thousand words—when you saw a child coming out in a diaper and SWAT officers in self-contained breathing apparatuses, my thought was, "Man, what has happened to this child for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week living in this environment?" And that was the first awareness for me of a population we've missed for decades of identifying kids living with substance-abusing parents. So that was for my career side of things. I did that for then 7 years and started working with the drug-endangered children efforts.

And then, ironically, even after I retired from law enforcement and am still doing [this work] where I am now with the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children—I live up in the mountains in Colorado, and about 150 yards away from our house is another house, because we live on 3 acres, and a 2-year old walked to our door. And by about the fourth time of him walking to our house, we finally talked with the neighbor, who had been given custody of his grandson because of his daughter's addiction. And [we talked about] the trouble that that was causing in the house—and he was already raising her 10-year old—and the 2-year old was just a little bit too much, you know, at that time. And so, [we] decided to become foster parents because we found out that the daughter was pregnant again and still in the depths of her addiction. So now I see things from the inside; for all those years in law enforcement I saw it from the outside. So 2 years ago I became a foster parent and then just a couple of months ago, [I] legally adopted two boys who are drug-endangered children. So I've seen it from the inside. So I'm more passionately involved with this effort, and [I] believe it even stronger today after now adopting two children that there is a huge difference that we can make in the life of a child if we all collaborate.

**Rebecca Rose:** Thank you, Lori, very much for sharing your story.

So for folks out there who may not have a really good understanding about what a drug-endangered child is, can you just elaborate a bit more on what we mean by that or how you all at the National DEC define a drug-endangered child?

**Commander Lori Moriarty:** Well, for National DEC and for the state DEC Alliances across the nation, we all actually came together to decide what a definition of this would be because it is important to have a definition so that we're all working from the same perspective on this. And really it came down to even though the drug-endangered children efforts a lot of times focused on meth labs, like the story that I just mentioned, because it was the most obvious—children living in hazardous locations with hazardous materials—we define a drug-endangered child as any child living with a parent who is dealing, manufacturing, cultivation, [or in] possession of illicit drugs—anything associated with the illicit drugs—and then also above and beyond that, the incapacitation of a caregiver because of their substance use [so] that the children are neglected or abused in the environments, because—it might be a prescription drug, but the fact is that it is lying out on the table—because the parent is just maybe addicted to the prescription drugs or obtained it fraudulently, and there is no care given to how they're using it and the safety around the children. So basically it is putting children at risk because of the illicit substance abuse.

**Rebecca Rose:** Great, thank you, Lori. And just hearing your story today from your career and your personal story, and we know that we see these stories every day about children exposed to drugs or drug-endangered children. And recently there was an article out of Oklahoma that talked about how a father was involving his three sons—ages 10, 14, and 17—in the cooking of methamphetamine. Now not only were these boys exposed to drugs and manufacturing in their home, but the article also mentioned that these boys were using meth and marijuana.

And another story out of South Carolina recently talked about how a local child advocacy center has seen a 35 percent increase in the number of neglect and abuse cases from 2009 to 2010, and many of those involved drug-endangered children. These types of reports come out of every community across our nation on a daily basis. And so from your perspective, from your career and your role now at National DEC, what do you see as the biggest challenge in effectively responding to children in unsafe environments, which include the production use of drugs such as described in these stories [that] we do hear every day?

**Commander Lori Moriarty:** Well, first I would mention, as described in those stories, what is very obvious in these efforts is “children see, children do.” You know, you just described a father who's teaching his children to help him manufacture [methamphetamines] and then they become involved in the use themselves. And we see that this is a huge population of generational reoccurrence of the addiction and ending up in the criminal justice system.

So for me, what was the big “Aha” moment when I mentioned to you that we saw this child living in this environment, and

in law enforcement [it] was always—wow, we would look at this child at 9 months of age and say, “we'll see you in 12 years in the criminal justice system or you'll be struggling with addiction yourself,” but yet not taking any action to intervene in this child's life at 9 months to change that trajectory. So as far as the challenges around the drug-endangered children efforts, it's the awareness that we all have a role to play, that it's going to take all disciplines. It's not one discipline alone that's going to solve this. You're going to need cops working with social workers working hand-in-hand with treatment providers working with educators. We all have a role to play. And when we come together to share information, share knowledge that could be in the best interest of the child and the family, we're going to be more successful.

It was the first time in my career that I looked [critically] at my law enforcement role. I used to look at it as supply reduction: boy, we're taking the drugs off the street and we can eliminate that [problem]. Well, there's millions of drugs on the streets. We also need to focus on the demand reduction: how do we stop the next generation to come in from using the drugs? And I believe that's by intervention and prevention. Intervention when it's already in their lives and prevention to keep it from being in their lives at all.

So the biggest challenge is going to be pulling all of us together. I think that we've recognized in the drug-endangered children's efforts—now that we've been doing this at the National Alliance for 6 years, overall for over a decade—that having a place that we can all centralize and share information and share knowledge and leverage our resources is the strength that gives state and local and tribal efforts a place to go to to further their efforts. You don't want to just go and do a big awareness campaign without giving them a direction of someplace to go to for the support when they actually have the knowledge to start identifying these children and intervening. So the challenge right now is building the infrastructure, which I am happy to report, I feel like we have a really good start of that with the efforts and with the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children, so that when you spread the word, people have a place to go to get help to actually make the effort happen. I think it is really going to change the future of the lives of these children if we can collaborate together.

**Rebecca Rose:** Great, Lori, thank you. So you've mentioned kind of building this infrastructure and it's really built on collaboration. In thinking about the folks that BJA works with most directly on this issue, [which] are state and local law enforcement partners, can you provide some examples? We know there's a lot of good things happening at the local level around drug-endangered children efforts. Can you just elaborate and provide some examples about how law enforcement can collaborate with other agencies to make an impact in their community on this issue?

**Commander Lori Moriarty:** I think law enforcement is one of the key components in all of this. We're first responders. We've always seen ourselves as those who intervene in the crisis situation. Probably the worst condition in a family's life [is] when we're going in because of the law enforcement impact, and so therefore we can also be one of the most critical pieces to turn a life around. And so

for law enforcement, the first piece is the awareness that these children are victims of their parents' substance abuse and that they might not have a broken bone or a fractured skull but that they have emotional injury and neglect, and it's the things inside that you can't see. You know, when I do this training across the nation and with law enforcement, I tell them you know these kids lack attachment, they lack nurturing, they lack physical and emotional care, they don't get to school consistently; and so if we can help identify them collaboratively with social services so that they can get services to heal, then we can make a huge difference. So for law enforcement, the first part is about identifying and not missing them. Identifying—whenever you go into a home where there is illegal substances, always ask “are there children?” Because the fact is that most of the time we are going to be doing drug arrests and the kids aren't going to be there. But they could have four, five, or six kids that we've missed. I [want to] bring up one quick example of a time when we raided a house five times for a meth lab and it wasn't until the fifth time that we actually found the kid. So where was that child the other four times? And I found out later that he was at school on two of the occasions. And we did the raid, boarded up the house, condemned it, arrested everybody in the home, and then he came home from school to nobody. We're a part of the situation that is not helping this child if we don't intervene. So, law enforcement has a key piece for the earliest identification point possible and then another huge piece of collaborating hand-in-hand with social services and sharing knowledge to give these families a better opportunity for intervention.

**Rebecca Rose:** Great, Lori, thank you. Can you talk a little bit about at the local level when this collaboration does work? And so you, at the National DEC, work with a lot of state drug-endangered children alliances, and we know there's local alliances too. Can you talk a little bit about how these DEC Alliances are formed or put together or how they're sustained, and how they kind of bring together people to collaborate to better respond?

**Commander Lori Moriarty:** Well, the interesting part about the DEC effort is that it is a common vision and that's one of the things that is—why it is so successful is that everyone believes that they want to intervene to help a child, we just missed it. So when you have a common vision, it's easier to develop the collaborations. When I was the

commander of the undercover unit, there was resistance at the beginning because we didn't understand each others' roles and responsibilities. And so when you get past that and say what is law enforcement's responsibility—evidence-collection, gathering information for the prosecution—and social services is about reunification and putting families back together, those are opposite ends of the spectrum. But when you sit down and look at it through the eyes of a child and you start thinking, “Okay, is this a family that can get services, can get help, can recover? How do we look at this together through the eyes of the child in the best interest of the child?” Then you kind of let go of your own beliefs and attitudes. I'm not saying that you don't gather the information that you're supposed to from your discipline, but you look at it in a totality of circumstances instead of just tunnel-visioned and siloed between one discipline's approach. When you start seeing the relationship between law enforcement and social services come together and better decisions being made, you really see a transformation in both law enforcement and social services that what they're doing is more effective, and therefore they're both more successful. And so really once you get past the forming and storming of building those relationships, it really does become more productive. I had law enforcement when we first started it [and] they were always counting success by seizures, “Oh, we seized a kilo of cocaine. Oh, we seized a kilo of heroin.” And it got to the point to where they were no longer counting their success by the seizures, but by the kids saved. Or maybe they would do both, “Wow, we seized a kilo of cocaine, but we identified 10 kids that we can work with social services to try to get the family help.” So getting past the initial set-up and institutionalizing it—when I say “institutionalizing it,” [I mean] when it's every cop is looking for a child and every social worker is collaborating with every cop instead of just maybe one cop and one social worker—then it's more sustainable because we don't have to retrain the one cop that used to do it.

**Rebecca Rose:** Great, thank you, Lori. Now for our listeners, I want to thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. This concludes part 1 of our conversation with Commander Lori Moriarty of the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children. To listen to part 2 of my conversation with Commander Moriarty, please click on the podcast directly underneath the one you just listened to—it should be labeled part 2—it's available under the NEW Podcast subject heading located on the left-hand column of your screen.

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