

Assistant AGs talk domestic violence in Rwanda, Costa Rica

By: Kris Olson March 1, 2018



Kimberly P. West, chief of AG Maura T. Healey's criminal bureau, poses with Rwanda government officials interested in expanding the availability of domestic violence shelters in the country.

In America, when a woman contacts a domestic violence shelter, one of the first questions she's asked is whether her abuser has a gun.

Suggest a similar script to government officials trying to expand such services in Rwanda, however, and you'll be greeted with puzzled looks.

"They just were confused about why we would ever ask such a question because they don't have a culture of gun violence," says Kimberly P. West, chief of Attorney General Maura T. Healey's criminal bureau.

West was the first member of the AG's Office to jump when the State Department reached out through the National Association of Attorneys General, looking for state prosecutors with firsthand experience in responding to domestic violence, something federal officials lack.

Months later, at West's urging, AAG Elizabeth K. Keeley would avail herself of a similar opportunity in Costa Rica.

In each case, after three days' worth of discussions, written protocols for assisting victims of domestic violence were collaboratively created. While the goals of the visits may have been similar, each country came with unique challenges, West and Keeley report.

As Rwanda continues to distance itself from its 1994 genocide, one of President Paul Kagame's reforms was to install women in positions of power, including in the government and police force.

For what remained a traditional culture, the drastic change brought unintended consequences, West says.

"These women would go to work and have all this responsibility, and they would come home and it was still very much a patriarchal society," she says. "If you know anything about domestic violence, you can imagine that dynamic is not a great thing."

At the time of West's visit, Kigali, with a population of over 850,000, had just one emergency shelter. The facility was advertised on billboards, another difference from the U.S., where shelter locations are not advertised for fear of retaliation against a victim reporting abuse and seeking help.

"There are things like that that are just culturally different, and we just adjusted for it," says West, who traveled to Rwanda with a paralegal.

Meanwhile, Keeley teamed with Boston Police Sgt. Lanita Cullinane, with whom she had worked on child sex abuse cases when Keeley was at the Suffolk District Attorney's Office.

Costa Rican officials had been working with the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the Department of Justice, laying groundwork around some "higher-level actionable items" around domestic violence, Keeley says.

What officials needed were insights into how police and municipal officials could come together with existing women's



Attendees of the three-day domestic violence program that Elizabeth K. Keeley helped lead in Costa Rica included local government officials, representatives of women's



organizations within the towns to develop what in the U.S. is called a “multidisciplinary approach,” both to provide resources to victims and hold abusers accountable, she says. To that end, the Boston Public Health Commission’s Family Justice Center was held up as a possible model.

organizations, social workers, police officers and even defense attorneys.

Such approaches are necessary, given that pleas for more financial support from Costa Rica’s central government have thus far fallen on deaf ears, attendees from Keeley’s program explained.

Keeley says Costa Rican officials were generally receptive to emulating the U.S., where non-governmental organizations operate shelters and otherwise assist victims of domestic violence.

“But still I think a lot of the Costa Rican attendees are looking to the larger government for more help than they’re getting,” Keeley says.

In the U.S., a victim need not go to the police station or otherwise disclose what is happening to get authorities to respond. Mechanisms have been established to encourage family members to make complaints on victims’ behalf or for reports to be funneled through organizations with which the victims are connected.

In Costa Rica, however, the onus is on the victim to a far greater degree, according to Keeley.

“Any sort of response will not happen unless you hear directly from a victim about her circumstance,” she says.

Given the difficulty victims have in coming forward, Keeley says a lot of the discussion in Costa Rica focused on whether a viable substitute for a victim’s “declaration” could be developed.

That an abuser would be prosecuted was less of a natural assumption than in the U.S., Keeley adds, noting that while other remedies were kicked around, “thinking about bringing a case in criminal court was not at all a priority.”



Rwandan President Paul Kagame has seen to it that women have been installed in positions of power, including the police force, as Kimberly P. West (right) found out firsthand.

While West and Keeley were dispatched to give the Rwandan and Costa Rican locals the benefit of their experience, they approached the task with an appropriate level of humility.

People in Costa Rica were well aware of highly publicized incidents of domestic violence, such as the one in which NFL star Ray Rice was captured on security cameras in elevators at an Atlantic City casino.

“We were able to talk about ‘it’s not like we’ve cured domestic violence here,’” Keeley says.

Both Keeley and West say their schedules did not permit much sightseeing, though West was able to squeeze in a visit to see the gorillas at Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda.

More important was the exposure to a society not organized around a common law system, West says.

“I think it’s great for lawyers to broaden their horizons, particularly in the kind of work we do, which is fairly serious work and the consequences are extremely serious,” she says.

Subsequent to Keeley’s trip, the AG’s Office also worked with the State Department to send two people to Armenia to talk about public corruption and their computer system for prosecutions. The office has also hosted groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon and Peru through the State Department.

“I think as professionals, this is something that’s really important,” West says. “Although we are state prosecutors, our perspective on all of this should be much broader.”

Keeley agrees.

While domestic violence may have been her focus in Costa Rica, “the bigger issue is human rights, and wherever we go this is what we’re talking about: basic rights, people’s dignity,” she says. “Seeing how that unifies us no matter where we are was really important for me.”

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