

Luis C.deBaca Returns to the Justice Department, appointed Director of the SMART Office

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The Justice Department's Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering and Tracking (SMART) has a new leader.

Luis deBaca has returned to the Justice Department after serving as the Ambassador-at-large for the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, where he coordinated government activities in the global fight against trafficking.

In November 2014, President Obama selected him to be the new director of the SMART Office.

"This is a really vibrant office that (has a huge impact) above its weight," he says. "It may be a small office but you can really see the difference [in what they do] – not just in sex offender notification but also sex offender management.

While he is still assessing the field, Director deBaca sees several high priority goals for his team to accomplish during his tenure.

First, he would like to continue the process of substantially implementing the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), which provides a comprehensive set of minimum standards for sex offender registration and notification in the United States. Currently, 17 states, 74 tribes and 3 territories have substantially implemented SORNA.

He also intends to evaluate new ways to address sex offender management.

"A lot can be done for sex offender management. Just look at the Office's Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI) project and Native American Sex Offender Management (NASOM) work. These efforts serve as a roadmap for how one should be thinking about not just sex offender management but even prevention."

Prevention is a high concern for deBaca.

"One of the challenges in this work is thinking about how to prevent sexual abuse from happening in the first place."

Examining data surrounding sex offenders is another goal. This means evaluating all of the current research, policy and grant making processes to gain insight and direction into the best ways to protect the public. "Unless we actually take the time to understand offenders, we'll neither be able to help them nor protect our communities. Seeking better understanding doesn't mean that we are excusing their actions, but if we are going to make effective policy choices, we have to have a research and knowledge base."

Director deBaca was first recruited by the Justice Department while he was still a law student at the University of Michigan. From 1993 through 2006, he led the investigation and prosecution of cases involving human trafficking, official misconduct, hate crimes, money laundering, organized crime and alien smuggling. He then went to the State Department in 2009, only to come full circle back to the Justice Department in the Fall of 2014.

The new SMART director has his work cut out for him, with many challenges.

"The interesting thing about the SMART Office is how do you make sure communities are safe and have all of the information on offenders, while at the same time reintegrating people back into society?"

This is something for his team to solve, but deBaca and his team seem up for the challenge. "It's nice to be home," deBaca said with a smile.