

**Testimony before the
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies**

“The State of Efforts to Stop Human Trafficking”

February 26, 2014

**Stephanie Vu
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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am a survivor of domestic minor sex trafficking.

Domestic minor sex trafficking is the name we have given to the sexual exploitation of U.S. citizen children through prostitution, pornography and sexual entertainment. The name reflects the fact that this exploitation is human trafficking as defined in the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA).¹ The victims of domestic minor sex trafficking—boys and girls averaging 12-14 years old at the time of their initial exploitation through prostitution—number at least 100,000 each year according to conservative estimates.

I survived sex trafficking and now provide experiential advice to two anti-trafficking organizations critical to my escape from exploitation. Shared Hope International has been working to rescue and restore women and children who suffer the devastating effects of sex trafficking, and prevent the spread of this crisis. Youth For Tomorrow has developed specialized trauma-centered services and shelter for victims of domestic minor sex trafficking, like me.

At the age of 12, I became a victim of sex trafficking. I was invited to a party and there I met a handsome older boy who took a lot of interest in me. Although flattered, I never thought I would see him again. Strangely, I did see him again—and again and again as I encountered him at the grocery store, Starbucks, everywhere it seemed I went. In my 12 year old mind, I was convinced this was fate and soon began intentionally meeting him every chance I had.

My mother, a military wife, worked day and night to support our family while my father was fighting in Iraq. My job was to watch my younger siblings, but there was little supervision for me, leaving me free to go on “dates” with this charming, older boy. I was searching for something in life and he looked like the answer, filling my loneliness and my young heart’s desire for love and romance. I soon learned though that he was a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” with calculated designs on turning me into a product to be devoured.

For a while it seemed my dreams had come true. He said he loved me and wanted to marry me; he bought nice things for me and took me out for dinner and to clubs and places I could never go to without him. However, in just a few months he demanded a return—I was sent to perform in a strip club. I did not want to, but he insisted he needed my help to escape a financial pinch and I naively felt that I owed him something. And so it began. I began skipping school and dancing in the strip clubs. It was degrading, but he would keep me under his control by saying and doing things that convinced me that I was doing it for him and for us. At the age of 13, I was too young to see that my life was no longer my own. I became a domestic minor sex trafficking victim.

Soon my trafficker asked for something more than dancing. I was told I would sell my body for sex acts. I will never forget this night for as long as I live. I refused but he threw me out of the house on that cold night, telling me to make the money or freeze out there. My clothing was inappropriate for the weather. I

¹ Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-386, Division A, § 103(8), (9), 114 Stat. 1464 (signed into law on October 29, 2000); codified as amended at 22 USC 7102 § 103(8), (9).

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was cold and I paced the streets. But the buyers were flagging me down and after a few hours of cold, I was hungry and could not feel my feet or hands. In desperation, I finally accepted one and climbed into the car.

The moment I stepped into that car my life was changed forever. There were three men that night; at the end of it I couldn't stop vomiting. So began endless nights of selling my body for my trafficker. I descended into depression. I drank alcohol and took drugs to dull the pain. The lifestyle I was living proved to me that this was all I was worth. I made the money my trafficker demanded and learned to live with his constant abuse and the abuse of the friends he would allow to "borrow" me.

Finally one night the police picked me up and recognized me as a reported missing child. I was returned home but quickly returned to my trafficker, and later I was arrested again. This time I was sent to juvenile detention where my probation officer seemed to suspect my victimization, but I denied that I was being trafficked and again was sent home on probation. A few days later, my trafficker exacted revenge for my not returning to him—I was raped in front of my home.

At this point I had finally had enough. At just 15 years old, I was ready to give up on life. I was so badly violated that I had to be hospitalized and while I was there my probation officer reached out to Linda Smith of Shared Hope International knowing that I could not return to my mother's house and hoping she could help. Linda conducted a search around the nation to find someplace where I would be safe and where they had the skills to address my need for emotional, physical and psychological healing. Finally, she located Youth For Tomorrow in Virginia—3,000 miles from my home. I had to come so far to have a chance to heal. I had to leave my frightened mother and my siblings because there was no place closer to home that could help me. I was tremendously reluctant then, but so grateful now for the chance to begin a new life. The day I was released from the hospital, Linda arranged for me to move into the most beautiful hotel room until I could be safely relocated. The memory of the view from that room—the view of freedom—still brings tears to my eyes.

Sadly my story of seduction and enslavement is not unique. Many go through what I did, and much more. I have seen girls younger than I was trafficked, and girls much older that had been exploited since they were my age. Most have not yet seen hope because, sadly, the story of my restoration is unique. Here is why:

1. Misidentification

Child sex trafficking victims are frequently misidentified as delinquents, runaways, and homeless. Misidentification causes a chain reaction of negative outcomes. It is the reason many victims do not access services. It is often the cause of detention as a criminal. I was misidentified many times until, finally, a probation officer who knew about sex trafficking spotted the signs in me and got me the help I needed.

Shared Hope International's *National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children*² states that in Las Vegas, 226 juveniles came before the Juvenile Court judge in just 20 months and in Dallas 165 juveniles were detained on prostitution and related charges in 2007 alone. These are numbers from just two cities—the real numbers in the communities across our country are certainly much

² http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/SHI_National_Report_on_DMST_2009.pdf

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larger. A child defined by the federal TVPA as a victim, is arrested for the crime committed against her. This arrest and treatment of the victim as a criminal is a secondary violence committed against her, compounding the trauma of the sexual violence she has already endured at the hands of the trafficker and the multitude of buyers who have used her.

2. No Placement Options

For those in law enforcement who recognize the exploitation the domestic minor sex trafficking victim is experiencing and want to take a victim-centered approach to the investigation, the lack of secure shelter is cited as the biggest problem they face. Law enforcement officers report they must charge a domestic minor sex trafficking victim in order to detain her in a secured facility to keep her safe from the pimp and the trauma-driven flight response. Rarely are services essential to a victim of sex trafficking provided in detention. Also, entry into the delinquency system can disqualify a victim from accessing victim of crime funds for services in some states. Without access to secure shelter in some form it becomes nearly impossible to protect the child victim of sex trafficking. Further, law enforcement has come to see the critical part victim services plays in stabilizing the victim to testify in the prosecution of traffickers. Unfortunately, such children often end up waiting for the trial of their exploiter in juvenile detention or in an unsafe placement.

Research by Shared Hope International reveals hundreds of children arrested, charged and prosecuted for prostitution despite their status as minors—and therefore as victims—of domestic minor sex trafficking. Another survivor of domestic minor sex trafficking relates her experience with repeated arrests:

*I was arrested 17 different times in all kinds of cities and every time I went to detention, they thought all they had to do is change where I was. So I ended up in group homes where people had serious drug and mental problems, but not my kind of problem...there was nothing to help me deal with the trauma of what happened to me. I wanted nothing to do with those places. Being with the “family” was at least something I was used to, so I ran away and back to my pimp every time. Each time I was transferred from out of state back to Ohio, it was in handcuffs and leg shackles and I was surrounded by policemen that I felt were my enemies. Despite my age, I spent 8 months in prison when my pimp caught a federal case. Yes, **I’m the one** that went to prison. I could never trust anyone. Sitting in a facility with criminals didn’t help; it only made me more bitter.*

Appropriate protective shelter and services are critical for the protection and restoration of child sex trafficking victims, but they do not exist in most of the country. Being sent home on probation did not address the trauma bonds and fear I lived under that caused me to return to my trafficker.

3. Insufficient Priority on Combating Demand

Buyers are not being recognized as a critical component in the sex trafficking of children; yet demand is the primary driver of the commercial sex industry within which children are being exploited for commercial sex activities and performance. Buyers of sex with children can be preferential (pedophiles), opportunistic (thrill seekers), or situational (do not care how old the person being prostituted is) — they are all committing a crime. I cannot count the number of men who bought sex acts with me every day, purposely, or recklessly, in disregard for my young age.

Innovative investigative techniques like the one originating in the Western District of Missouri are clearing the way for federal prosecutions of buyers under the federal sex trafficking statute. The forward-

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thinking U.S. Attorney's Office in that district has pursued buyers of commercial sex with children by working with the local human trafficking task force to plan and implement an Internet sting operation designed to satisfy the evidentiary requirements of the federal TVPA—specifically sections 1591 and 2224(b)—using the words “obtain” and “entice” to charge, indict and secure guilty pleas by the offenders. Since this operation, the federal prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of South Dakota have secured the critical Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals opinion that buying, and attempted buying, of commercial sex acts with a victim of trafficking is a criminal offense under the federal sex trafficking statute, 18 U.S.C. § 1591.³ This federal leadership is essential to embolden the states to take action against buyers as well as traffickers.

4. Online Facilitation of Sex Trafficking Unimpeded

The Internet is the new prostitution track. Just as law enforcement patrol prostitution zones in cities across the country, online facilitators of domestic minor sex trafficking must continue to be investigated and stopped. The blockade presented by the federal Communications Decency Act to state prosecution or civil suits by victims is unacceptable and a solution must be found to stop the industry from profiting from the crime of sex trafficking taking place in their webpages.

What can Congress do?

Congress must make domestic minor sex trafficking victim protections, especially development of shelter and services, a priority – the success of combating demand and restoring victims depends on it.

There are actions Congress can take to overcome this primary barrier to the proper response to the victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. First, pass **H.R. 3530** (cross-filed in the Senate as S. 1738), the “**Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act,**” introduced by Rep. Ted Poe and currently co-sponsored by fifty-five members of Congress. Congress has the opportunity and obligation to send a strong message to the fifty states that Congress intends for these children to be treated as victims and to be protected. H.R. 3530 will ensure that shelters and services for domestic minor sex trafficking victims are provided and will empower the law enforcement and prosecutors in up to six funded locations with better resources, investigative tools and staffing to make prosecution a real consequence for engaging in the sale and purchase of sex with a minor child.

A second key action Congress can take to remedy the failure to protect the young victims of this crime is to tie standards of protection and services for the protected class of domestic minor sex trafficking victims to current federal funding streams to the states. Congress can ensure the proper victim rights and treatment for the child sex trafficking victim by requiring certain standards of care and the development and provision of certain protections for the victims by imposing conditions on federal funding to states. **H.R. 3610**, the “**Stop Exploitation Through Trafficking Act of 2013,**” introduced by Rep. Erik Paulsen, attempts to use the power of the purse to move states to take the necessary action to protect child sex trafficking victims from punitive responses for the offenses they commit as a result of their trafficking victimization.

Collaboration was essential to intervene and protect me from my trafficker and the many, many buyers who exploited me for commercial sex acts every night. The U.S. Department of Justice's Human

³ United States v. Jungers, 702 F.3d 1066 (8th Cir. 2013).

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Trafficking Task Forces bring together federal, state and local law enforcement and prosecutors and victim service organizations to prevent and prosecute human trafficking. The 2013 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act authorized, for the first time, funding specifically and separately for human trafficking task forces focused on all forms of human trafficking. This provides funds to train law enforcement personnel on how to identify severe forms of trafficking and related offenses. More trained law enforcement means more interventions and more survivors.

Conclusion

My journey has made me strong; strong enough to advocate for the victims we might never hear from. My faith in God and His remarkable way of making beauty from the ashes of my life has emboldened me to speak to you on their behalf. The funding of organizations and agencies like the ones I have mentioned is vitally important. Without the intervention and care I accessed through the collaboration of agencies and officials in the place I was being trafficked, I might never have escaped the bonds of my trafficker. I testify before you today as a survivor—one of the lucky ones—and I urge you to bring the funding needed and support the growing body of law designed to stop this crime and protect us, the victims.

For my part, I have shared my story in a critical awareness video produced by Shared Hope International called *Chosen*. It is my hope that it will keep many from the ordeal I endured by alerting them to the techniques used by traffickers and the devastating result of believing their lies. Thank you.

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