

**Written Statement of**

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*Hearing on Sex Trafficking*

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**Sex, Money, and the Forgotten Victim**

Some of the information and facts contained herein are derived from training and research, but all information and observations are supported by personal experiences and actual investigations and interviews during the course of my tenure as a human trafficking investigator.

**Problem**

Human Trafficking is a crime that cuts across all races, ethnicities, genders, and socio-economic classes. Traffickers prey on the vulnerabilities of their intended victims, depriving them of their human dignity and worth for the purposes of profit, regardless of the victim's country of birth, background, or age<sup>1</sup>. It is a crime that does not discriminate and has increasingly shifted to preying upon the youth in our communities. A crime that was once thought to target intended victims from low socio-economic classes, has become disturbingly more prevalent in some of the most affluent suburbs throughout the United States. It is of note that victims can be exploited in their own states, neighborhoods, schools, churches, or even their own homes. The reality is that our children, one of the most vulnerable and sought-after populations by traffickers, can be exploited on a routine basis by these profit-driven predators and yet may still be coming home every night for dinner, sleeping in their own beds, and going to school every day. Traffickers in some sense are highly sophisticated, deploying new methods of carrying out their criminal enterprises in an effort to thwart efforts by law enforcement to detect, interdict, and dismantle their operations. One of the largest problems faced by the community of professionals working to eradicate sex trafficking, particularly among our teen population, is misidentification, thereby leaving a large group of adolescents that have endured a great deal of trauma and victimization never being formally identified as a victim. These victims

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report (2013), <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt>

do not receive the services and intervention that they need to help them recover and become productive members of society.

Most people do not believe that human trafficking will ever affect them directly, or believe that it is an international crime that does not have domestic victims. The unsettling truth is that every community and every home in America is at risk to falling victim to human trafficking; the most vulnerable group being our children. It is estimated that at least 100,000 US children are induced into the commercial sex trade every year here in the United States. Because of the lack of acceptance that sex trafficking is a reality in the US, many victims, and the families driven to protect them, adopt the belief that ‘this could never happen to me.’ The lack of awareness as to how traffickers scout, manipulate, and trap juveniles into a life of sexual exploitation and servitude presents a cumbersome problem for law enforcement, educators, social services, and anti-trafficking organizations alike. One can only address a threat appropriately when they are aware the threat exists. The white work van abducting our children from street corners and forcing them into a life of prostitution is very rare. Rather, it is smooth words and empty promises that trap and manipulate children, forcing them into a life of sex with strangers. And as the traffickers exploit technology, specifically social media, to enhance their abilities of recruiting, their presence in the lives of the children becomes more of reality. This reality calls for increased vigilance on the part of parents and society as a whole. It is important to have an understanding of what human trafficking looks like here in the United States to be able to safeguard our children. Awareness of the issue and acceptance that our families are vulnerable is the one of the principle steps in combating human trafficking.

### **Manifestations of Sex Trafficking**

The reality is that sex trafficking, in various forms, does not occur in illegal underground industries hidden from sight, rather most of the illegal operations are facilitated through legitimate commerce. The accessibility of commercial sex, in which the demand is usually met through the criminal operations of a traffickers, is more prevalent in today’s society than it ever has been in the past. Regardless of whether one lives in middle-class suburbia, wealthy downtown business districts or subsidized housing, trafficking is most likely occurring in plain sight. Additionally, there are consumers of sex trafficking within each of these types of neighborhoods. More importantly, the children that are living in each of these environments are also vulnerable to the traffickers’ deceptions

Instances of sex trafficking manifest themselves in three basic forms: brothel networks, pimp-controlled, and gang-controlled. Brothel networks are found in the form of, what appears to be, legitimate commercial establishments or they can also be found in residential neighborhoods. Throughout the United States, law enforcement continues to uncover residential brothels in ‘well-to-do’ gated communities, communities that are not known for being infested with criminal conduct. Within these brothel networks, which appear in many forms, victims usually remain in one location for a determinate period of time, typically one week, and then they are relocated. The victims are forced to remain onsite for the duration and endure long hours, inadequate and

inhumane living conditions under the threat of violence to themselves or their families while engaging in commercial sex. Some of these brothel networks can be localized within a geographic region, such as northern Virginia, or they can be multi-state or multi-national criminal enterprises, often times preying on the vulnerabilities of foreign nationals who are unfamiliar with the laws of the United States.

Pimp-controlled scenarios have become an exponentially greater threat as they are shifting toward recruiting younger victims. Recognizing that the average age of induction into commercial sex in the United States is thirteen (13) years old, it is evident that pimps have resorted to inducing and maintaining younger victims than historically. Pimps will typically advertise using internet-based methods including Backpage.com. These traffickers are using hotel rooms and common forms of public transportation to harbor and transport victims of trafficking. They may be moving juveniles to and from multiple states in an effort to maximize their profit and avoid detection from law enforcement.

One of the most disturbing, but rapidly emerging trends is that of gang-controlled sex trafficking. Gangs, commonly believed to be all about violence, have now learned that the violence simply serves a means to an end; that end being profitable crime. Gangs have learned that sex trafficking, particularly of minors, is a low-risk, high-yield criminal enterprise that adequately funds their gang operations throughout the United States and internationally. Drawing from their reputation of violence, often times glorified through Hollywood, gangs can use the “threat” of violence as a means of control for these vulnerable and uninformed youth.

### **Profile of the Victims**

The traffickers are focusing their recruitment efforts on children because of particular vulnerabilities that impressionable young people possess. These vulnerabilities fall into four main categories: economic vulnerabilities, victims of prior abuse (sexual or physical), situational vulnerabilities (homeless or runaway children), and “other at-risk”, which includes children with low self-esteem, attention-seeking youth, children from homes lacking stability or children who lack an understanding of healthy relationships. It is essential to understand that these “other at-risk” youth are the children in every school, every neighborhood, every church and youth group and potentially in any home. The dynamics of family have changed over the past few decades, and the traffickers have taken note, exploiting those changes in dynamics to draw young people into a life of servitude through false promises and coercion. In these instances, the traffickers never have to provide their victims with monetary rewards; rather they offer love and affection to a child who is not being fulfilled at home<sup>2</sup>.

It can be challenging to sympathize or understand how a person is coerced or induced into engaging in commercial sex by someone simply taking advantage of their personal vulnerabilities. Regardless, it is important to remember that the victimization is the same, whether physical force is utilized or the more pervasive forms of mental manipulation. Arguably,

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<sup>2</sup> Rao, Smriti, & Christina Presenti, *Understanding Human Trafficking Origin: A Cross-Country Empirical Analysis*, in *Feminist Economics*

coercion to induce someone into a life of servitude and slavery delivers a greater degree of psychological damage because the person was manipulated to believe that he/she was complicit in their own victimization. In situations where the victim believes that they agreed to engage in the conduct, there is an increase in self-blame and personal shame on the part of the victim<sup>3</sup>. This complex trauma is very difficult to clinically diagnosis and effectively treat, often times frustrating the child's treatment plan and hindering progress to restoring the child to a state of normalcy, as generally accepted by society.

Traffickers employ a large amount of psychological manipulation as a means of power and control over their victim. As a result, the victims are made to believe that they consented to their own victimization, and in some instances, they believe that they themselves are the offenders. In this way, victims of trafficking will rarely seek help or report these cases to the proper authorities<sup>4</sup>.

Debatably, no one can consent to exploit themselves, and particularly no child under the age of 18. A person cannot fully understand the mental, emotional and physical abuse that they will endure while being exploited. The human brain is wired for intimacy. In every sexual act, the human brain needs an emotional attachment to the sexual partner, or at minimum, physical attraction to appropriately process the sexual encounter. Devoid of this attachment, engaging in a sex act, particularly a commercial sex act, cannot properly be interpreted by the brain. Therefore, the effects on the brain of commercial sex are equivalent to the effects of the worst forms of sexual abuse. However, at the time the victim consciously consents, their brain cannot subconsciously fathom the effects on the brain and body<sup>5</sup>.

### **Profile of the Offenders**

As much as the profile of the victim defies all demographic classifications, so does the profile of the offender. Those willing to victimize other human beings for purposes of profit come in all forms. However, one commonality among the traffickers is their ability to identify and exploit certain vulnerabilities. It should also be noted, that as the age of the victims statistically falls, so does the age of the traffickers. There are several reasons for the decline in the average age of both categories. The summation of those reasons is the availability of information, predominately through the internet.

Traffickers can discover a wealth of knowledge through the internet. There are several websites like [www.pimpfeet.com](http://www.pimpfeet.com) that educate readers on how to scout, manipulate, and trap human beings into a life of sexual servitude. Additionally, there are several books in print discussing the same principles as well as success stories of prolific pimps. These books, like "[Pimpology: 48 Rules of the Game](#)", can also be downloaded electronically onto a Kindle or other electronic device for easier reading and access.

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<sup>3</sup> Farley, Melissa. *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. Psychology Press, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report (2013), <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt>

<sup>5</sup> Farley, Melissa. *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. Psychology Press, 2003.

Traffickers not only gain knowledge on how to be successful in their criminal endeavors, but they are also routinely exploiting social media to find their victims. Social media sites, like FaceBook, have become one of the primary methods of scouting used by the traffickers. Much in the same manner that the Government has methodically gathered intelligence to focus their efforts at making the mission more effective and efficient, the traffickers have now adopted a similar method of operation. There is an ever-expanding movement towards social media, and the young people in the United States are sharing their daily lives with world-wide web and any one taking the opportunity to 'follow' them. As almost every teenager has said to their parents at some point in their lives, "you just don't know what it is like to be a teenager today," traditionally those words were uttered within the walls of their own home. In today's society, those words are uttered on the 'walls' of a FaceBook page, where the traffickers are intently lying in wait and listening for the opportunity to offer false promises of 'understanding,' 'identity' and 'love.' Ideologies that are paramount to any human being, especially a developing adolescent.

Traffickers also use services like Greyhound Bus services to move victims from one location to another, not only because it is a cost effective method of transportation, but the traffickers know that proper identification is not required to purchase or obtain a bus ticket. Therefore, this allows traffickers to transport minors using aliases through these bus services and leaving little to no trail for law enforcement to track their movements and recover the juveniles being exploited.

### **Noteworthy Investigations**

The aforementioned conclusions are drawn from countless interviews, investigations, and prosecutions relating to human trafficking in northern Virginia. Those investigations centralized in Virginia have, however, touched locations outside of Virginia like Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Indiana, Nevada, California, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Illinois. Sex trafficking investigations are some of the most complex investigations that law enforcement is tasked with addressing. The complexity of these investigations is a result of the difficulty in addressing the needs of the victims, following the electronic and money trails, and the overall scope of the cases.

As previously stated, the victimization of those trafficked is extremely complex. A victim has several needs ranging from basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, to the more intricate needs of crisis management and therapeutic treatment. The approach to these investigations calls for a necessary shift in law enforcement's traditional approach to criminal investigations. The new 'norm' is a victim-centered approach, where the needs of the victim and stabilization are the principle priority. This requires a unique understanding of the complex dynamics at-play by the investigator, the supervisors, and management within the law enforcement agencies. Apprehension and prosecution of the offenders is the secondary goal, whereas without a stable victim, a successful prosecution is almost impossible. To appropriately

address the needs of the victim it is essential to take on a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach to victim services. This process is often hindered by a lack of resources, appropriate services, funding, and the inability to share certain information.

Recalling, the predominance of traffickers online scouting new victims, traffickers have also turned to the internet as a means of advertising. Traffickers are plainly advertising their illegal services on internet sites like Backpage.com, a site which maintains a legitimate and legal function as a location to post online classifieds. Additionally, what is mostly a 'cash business' is using prepaid debit cards from companies like GreenDot and Vanilla Visa as a means of moving monies anonymously and without accountability. Illegal monies earned through commercial sex can be placed on these debit cards that require no verification of identity. The cards can then be used to purchase hotels, transportation, cell phones, condoms, and other items that travel in interstate commerce to further their trafficking enterprise. The difficulties in tracking persons engaged in illegal activities has become increasingly more complicated. Additionally, certain companies operating within the United States have stalled law enforcement investigations into the commercial sexual exploitation of children due to a lack of responsiveness to court-ordered legal process requesting information or claims that the company retains no electronic records of information transmitted or received through these services offered over the internet.

One of the most misunderstood complexities of these investigations is the scope of the case. When referring to the 'scope' there are two areas which are most notable: amount of records to compile and track and the number of victims involved in the case. Between hotel records, electronic records, cellular records, financial records, and information received from social media sites, the amount of data to be compiled, reviewed, and analyzed is overwhelming and greater than most investigations native to law enforcement in the United States. Secondly, the number of victims identified through the course of these investigations far exceeds the number of victims in more common investigations. Given that the complex trauma experienced by these victims is real, their needs much greater than most victims, and the number of victims identified in each case unprecedented, these investigations would call for a team of trained and experienced investigators working collectively to appropriately and effectively address each of these investigations.

Since 2011, the United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia through the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force has successfully prosecuted over 42 defendants for trafficking related conduct in northern Virginia. Of those cases prosecuted, over 50 juvenile victims of sex trafficking and more than 300 adult victims have been identified. The US Attorney's Office has aggressively prosecuted pimps and gangs alike for this conduct.

One of the most notable cases was that of the *Underground Gangster Crips*, a case in which a group of Crips gang members were trafficking juvenile and adult females throughout northern Virginia for more than six years. This criminal street gang was recruiting young girls from FaceBook as well as public locations like bus stops, metro rail stations, and malls. The gang exploited the concept of 'family' and targeted young girls who were having issues at home or other areas of their personal lives. They would offer them an identity, a sense of belonging,

and understanding in a time when their lives were otherwise tumultuous and uncertain. Initially very sympathetic and compassionate to the intended victims, once the exploitation began they would trap them with illegal narcotics and maintain power and control through the use of physical and sexual assaults. The investigation revealed that Justin Strom, the leader of the Underground Gangster Crips, and his co-conspirators attempted to recruit over one thousand young girls from the northern Virginia area. These girls were exploited in northern Virginia neighborhoods and were advertised on the street or online through Backpage.com. This group would routinely use prepaid debit cards to conceal and move the monies earned through their illegal operations.

In another investigation, it was revealed that a group alleging to be a rap group, *Black Italian Family*, recruited girls from multiple states and trafficked them into the northern Virginia area. This group used prepaid debit cards to pay for transportation, hotels, cellular telephones, condoms, and to move illegally obtained monies around undetected. The group would ply unsuspecting juveniles with molly and other illegal narcotics. One of the juveniles trafficked by the group made over \$8000 in one night engaging in commercial sex in northern Virginia, although none of that money was given back to the victims. These men were charged with running a Child Exploitation Enterprise in violation of 18 U.S.C. 2252A(g). This is one of the only times that this statute has ever been used to prosecute traffickers in the United States.

There have been multiple members of the violent transnational criminal street gang MS-13 who have been arrested and convicted of sex trafficking in the Eastern District of Virginia. These gang members, recruiting girls as young as 12 years old, would typically recruit them at parties, provide them with drugs and alcohol and threaten violence against them or their families if they did not comply with demands of the gang.

Among all of these notable cases, the victims never self-reported for fear of retaliation from their traffickers. Investigators have never been able to fully identify all persons that were victimized by these groups because of the lack of reporting and misidentification that exists among this population, and yet it is known that each of these groups victimized over twenty females each during the period in which their criminal enterprise was active. Additionally, the complexity of these cases and lack of resources to fully investigate them yields the unsettling reality that there are several more scenarios similar to these occurring right now throughout the United States.

### **Collaborative Efforts at Combating the Issue**

The Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force was fortunate to have been awarded a grant by the United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crimes. The United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia leads the Task Force where the Fairfax County Police Department and Polaris Project partner together through the Enhanced Collaboration Model to combat the issues of human trafficking in northern Virginia. Being awarded this grant has afforded the opportunity for the Fairfax County Police Department to establish a full-time Human Trafficking Unit (HTU). This unit, currently

comprised of one investigator and one analyst, is responsible for tracking the instances of human trafficking throughout the region and investigating cases of trafficking within Fairfax County. Since its inception in October 2013, the HTU has received over 70 tips and leads relative to trafficking activities in the northern Virginia region. The HTU is actively investigating, as the lead agency or supporting other local or federal law enforcement with, 42 human trafficking cases. It is the consensus among human trafficking investigators, that one investigator can effectively handle two to three cases at one time. 52% of those cases involve juvenile sex trafficking cases where the victims range in age from 10 to 18 years old. In order to effectively address the issue and successfully dismantle and prosecute these trafficking enterprises, law enforcement, in conjunction with other service providers, has to have the opportunity to dedicate appropriate resources to handle the volume of cases that is present not just in northern Virginia, but throughout the United States. After law enforcement has been properly trained to identify trafficking, the next challenge is mustering the resources to investigate these very complex and resource-draining investigations. As previously mentioned, due to multiple factors, these cases quickly deplete the resources of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies responsible for investigating cases of trafficking. The Fairfax County Police Department is one of the few local law enforcement agencies in the United States that has a dedicated Human Trafficking Unit and even still the resources are limited.

One of the greatest needs with regards to the issue is the need for community awareness. It has recently been noted by several persons throughout the United States, that there is a lack of community awareness, and it is proven that awareness of the issue is the best method of prevention. In response to this need, the Fairfax County Police Department spearheaded a public awareness campaign in northern Virginia in collaboration with multiple agencies to include Fairfax County Office for Women and Domestic Violence, Juvenile Court Services Unit, Fairfax County Public Schools, Multicultural Clinical Center, and community advocates like the Fairfax Community Church and Hiddenbrook Communications. This campaign, rightly named the *Just Ask Campaign*, launched a website in January 2014, [www.justaskva.org](http://www.justaskva.org). The website, which is one of the only sites of its kind in the United States, is aimed at educating not only the community, but also attracting the teen population with innovative approaches like quizzes to help teens identify whether they may be being manipulated into a life of sexual servitude. The website, and campaign as a whole, seeks to educate teenagers, parents, and the community on the realities of sex trafficking. The website is complimented by a wristband campaign that is currently being promoted in the schools and community, where teens and adults alike are wearing blue colored wristbands with “Just Ask” imprinted on them to raise awareness of the issue and draw attention to the website. The working group is currently seeking to expand awareness through a poster campaign and production of other literature aimed at the general public, particularly the teen population, once funding can be secured.

In partnership with the Fairfax County Police Department, the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) have developed a curriculum for students beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and



continuing through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade where students will receive age-appropriate education and awareness training regarding teen sex trafficking. This comprehensive and robust curriculum is the first of its kind in the United States and necessary for all school-age children across the country as trafficking does not discriminate and is occurring in an increasing number of communities throughout the US. The curriculum was developed by Dr. Liz Payne and a one-hour long video presentation was created in conjunction with the curriculum. That video presentation and information is available online for anyone to view.<sup>6</sup> The information, approach, and language used in the curriculum was developed in conjunction with the *Just Ask Prevention Project* to ensure universality of message.

There are several other prevention programs that work in collaboration with the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force to identify and provide intervention to ‘at-risk’ youth. The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force (NVRGTF), through the Gang Reduction Intervention Team (GRIT) Coordinators has identified various programs that are aimed at providing intervention not just for those at-risk for gang involvement, but also those who may be at risk for exploitation. The successful approaches to combating gang infestation in northern Virginia have proven to be an ideal and adaptable model to addressing the issues of human trafficking. Therefore, using the lessons learned from the NVRGTF and implementing similar programs will increase effective anti-trafficking practices. Additionally, the need for programs like the Arlington County Girl’s Outreach program is essential. A program that identifies at-risk girls and provides after-school supervision, mentoring, and counseling services teach girls appropriate decision-making and life skills aimed at preventing exploitation and victimization. This program, unique to Arlington County in its comprehensive approach has been proven to be effective and an invaluable augmentation of services for at-risk girls.

Prevention through education is the primary goal of the collaborative efforts to combat trafficking, but that does not completely eradicate trafficking and there becomes the necessity for intervention. Intervention, as previously discussed, presents two unique categories of problems. The first challenge is the prosecution of cases. In addition, to the complexities involved in addressing the needs of the victims and securing their testimony and cooperation for prosecution, there is the sweeping volume of evidence to compile. Some companies operating inside the United States delay responses to subpoenas or search warrants hinder law enforcement’s ability to react swiftly to recover children being exploited. Once the offenders are arrested and charged, there exists the frustration of punitive sentences consistently falling below the Federal Sentencing Guidelines. When defendants are recommended stiff penalties for their predatory and life-altering conduct, judges are imposing sentences well-below those recommendations. There is also the challenge in proving force, fraud, or coercion in instances where the victims are 18 years of age or older. In these cases, the traffickers refrain from physical force to avoid prosecution and use other forms of mental manipulation that are difficult to prove statutorily. The Mann Act (18 U.S.C. 2421-2423) criminalizes transportation of persons across state lines for the purposes of prostitution, however the Act currently has no provisions for mandatory

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fcps.edu/fairfaxnetwork/trafficking/index.html>

minimums when the victims are adults. This does not accurately reflect the level of victimization placed on those exploited by the traffickers.

The second challenge to intervention is providing appropriate therapeutic and other social services to the victims of this deplorable crime. Training among mental health professionals is lacking, and it is difficult to find residential treatment centers that are equipped to handle the complex trauma present with this victim population. In responding to this need, the Fairfax County Police Department in conjunction with the Multicultural Clinical Center and Prince William County (Virginia) Juvenile Court Services has developed and is in the initial phases of implementing a training program for residential treatment facilities in Virginia. This training will provide clinical workers with the foundational knowledge regarding commercial sexual exploitation and appropriate treatment modalities for victims. This program is unique in the certification that it offers from any other program in the United States, but its need reaches well beyond the borders of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Another area of concern that is often not addressed is the demand for commercial sex that fuels the traffickers' criminal enterprises. Individual states are enacting legislation to increase penalties for those that are paying for commercial sex, however the ability to prosecute these offenders who are taking advantage of human beings held in slavery does not exist on the federal level when those behaviors affect interstate commerce. By deterring those who are purchasing sex through stiff federal penalties would equally deter the instances of sex trafficking in the United States.

Through providing the necessary resources to allow law enforcement in collaboration with other governmental and non-governmental organizations, a collaborative approach will better educate, prevent, and intervene in trafficking scenarios in an effort to deter traffickers, reduce the number of victims, and restore the lives of those exploited. These resources include stiffer penalties for criminal behavior indicative of trafficking conduct, training for service providers to institute effective practices of treatment, and awareness and training through a national campaign to unveil the reality of trafficking in the diverse communities through the United States where traffickers prey on the young and vulnerable regardless of their background. I have witnessed first-hand the negative impact that trafficking has on the life of a young person, recalling the average life expectancy of a trafficking victim is only seven (7) years after the exploitation begins. However, I have also witnessed first-hand the restoration of a person and their basic human rights and dignity through proper response, treatment, and justice through meaningful prosecutions. I have witnessed first-hand that there is hope.