

Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing on “Implementation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act”

May 12, 2023

Bella Hounakey

Good morning, my name is Bella Hounakey, and I am a member of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. Thank you for having me here today to speak on behalf of the Council. The members of the Council are sincerely grateful to Congress, the White House, and each agency of the President’s Interagency Taskforce to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons for its efforts to combat human trafficking.

Since the Council’s inception in 2015, the Council has published 6 reports, with recommendations to federal agencies. This year, the Council has begun planning for its 2023 report, with a focus on how to best address gaps in services and supports for human trafficking survivors.

In my time on the Council, I have born witness to the strength of collaboration. For example, in the Council’s interactions with the Departments of State and Health and Human Services, we have discussed and made recommendations on the importance of agency engagement of survivors. In my personal capacity, I have collaborated with non-government agencies like the Warnath Group as a Subject Matter Expert. These engagements give me hope—at last—our voices, suggestions, and recommendations to the federal government and non-government as survivors are not about sharing our trauma or our past experiences. They are about collaboration, and partnership.

I will not be sharing my story with you today. But I can say with certainty that all who have survived human trafficking, how they are living today, and are able to tell their stories is the embodiment of the strength of the human will and human spirit.

Their—our—experience is also a tale of morality. It is a story of more than surviving. It is a story of the power of evil and the human spirit’s refusal to be dominated by it. The Council, since its inception, has prioritized collaboration with federal agencies toward common goals to combat trafficking by making efforts to identify and address the causes of human trafficking at their root. We have called upon federal agencies to increase awareness and efforts to address issues of inequity, poverty, and mass incarceration as factors that contribute to human trafficking. We have called upon federal agencies to address the demand for forced labor and sexual exploitation by holding buyers and traffickers accountable and hope to continue to call for increased accountability of companies who exploit young people for cheap labor.

All of us here know that human trafficking is a complex and changing issue, which requires consistent efforts from all of us—from government to law enforcement, non-governmental organizations, and individuals.

Exploitation is a humanitarian crisis which demands a multifaceted response involving a range of strategies and stakeholders. Survivor leaders must continue to be among these voices and

represent a diversity of experiences and backgrounds, with sincere effort to reach communities government does not often engage or hear from.

I was a direct recipient of the services and supports afforded through the TVPA. I can attest, through my own experience, to the progress we have made together in improving outcomes for human trafficking survivors.

However, there are still many unaddressed needs survivors still face today. Many do not have access to essential mental health services and lack short and long-term housing supports. In many industries, children and immigrant visa holders remain at high risk for experiencing labor trafficking in this country.

Members of this committee should be proud of the strides made through the TVPA but also remain vigilant to make more! I am hopeful that together, we can create pathways of opportunity so that survivors, especially male victims can have housing support and can become self-sufficient, fully reintegrate and reclaim their lives where holistic quality of care becomes a reality. I believe this all possible, if we continue to work together.

On behalf of the Council, we look forward to collaborating with you as we continue our important work. Thank you for having me here today.