

**Rep. Louise M. Slaughter**

**Human Resources Subcommittee Testimony**

**October 23, 2013**

Thank you, Chairman Reichert, and the Members of the Human Resources Subcommittee for giving me the opportunity today to testify on this incredibly important issue. We all know and have said many times that children are this country's most precious resources. All of us in this room who are parents know what lengths we would go to in order to protect our own children from harm.

We wish that every child had the opportunity to grow up in a family that loved and protected them, but unfortunately that is not the case. As a result, about 400,000 children are in the foster care system as we speak. There have been great improvements in recent years in terms of reducing the numbers of children in foster care, reducing the length of stay for a child in foster care and increasing the number of children who find permanent and loving homes. We should acknowledge and be proud of the advancements that have been made, particularly the focus on supporting youth as they age out of the system.

The fact of the matter is that a majority of foster care parents are loving and supportive individuals who open their hearts and their homes. These foster care parents could rightfully be described as the better angels among us- and deserve to be recognized for the incredible difference they make in the world every day.

Yet even for these incredible champions, protecting young people in foster care from the threats of the outside world is a big challenge. And statistics tell us that foster children are exceptionally vulnerable to those who seek to exploit children.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children tells us that 60% of runaways who are victims of sex trafficking were at one time in the custody of social services or in foster care. In my home state of New York, 85% of trafficking victims have prior child welfare involvement. While state-specific numbers vary throughout the country, they all tell us that something more needs to be done.

I am proud to be the original cosponsor of HR 2744, the Child Sex Trafficking Data and Response Act, sponsored by my colleague Erik Paulsen. This bill addresses a number of important issues that must be addressed if we are to reduce the incidences of sex trafficking in the United States.

Among other things, the legislation:

- Identifies and documents children within the child welfare system who are victims of sex trafficking;
- Trains child protective services workers to identify and provide services to victims of sex trafficking;
- Coordinates efforts with state law enforcement, juvenile justice and social services; and

- Reports the number of children known or suspected to be victims of trafficking each year.

All of these approaches are good and necessary, but the part of this bill that is of primary importance to me is that the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act will be amended to require that child victims of sex trafficking will now be considered victims of abuse and neglect, making them eligible to receive services within the child welfare system.

The idea that a young person rescued from a sex trafficking operation could be considered an offender within the juvenile justice system was shocking to me. These are victims in the strongest sense of the word – children who have been preyed upon by those who would take advantage of their situation, the fear and loneliness that comes from being in the foster care system, to use them to their own advantage. They deserve help, a chance at healing and wholeness, not a criminal record.

I have worked for many years on issues of domestic violence and sexual assault in the military. In 1994, I drafted the original Violence Against Women Act with my good friend Pat Schroeder. And in recent years I've fought to pass numerous protections into law that have provided our servicemen and women with resources, support and the agency to seek justice in cases of sexual assault and successfully prevent cases of sexual assault before they occur.

In the process, I've watched women go from victims to survivors after receiving the services that the agencies funded by legislation have been able to offer. We've watched the incidence of domestic violence fall by 67% since 1994 when VAWA first passed. I believe we can see the same kind of impact from addressing sex trafficking among our foster youth.

The same way millions of victims of domestic violence have been drawn out of the shadows and been given a place to stand because of VAWA, I believe this legislation and other ideas being considered before this committee today are the path forward for these precious young people who deserve all of the assistance we can provide.

Thank you for your time and your consideration today.