

Rep. Ted Poe (TX-02) Testimony
Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care
Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means

Thank you Chairman Reichert and Ranking Member Doggett for inviting me today to testify on this important issue.

In my former life, I was a criminal court judge for 22 years and spent 8 years as a prosecutor. I saw the worst of the worst in the courthouse and saw that our justice system too often focused on the criminal and not the victim. When I came to Washington, I wanted to give victims a voice, so I cofounded the Congressional Victims' Rights Caucus (VRC) with Congressman Jim Costa (D-CA).

The VRC has helped pass important legislation for crime victims over the years. Now, we are focused on combating human trafficking. This topic is of particular interest to me because my hometown of Houston, Texas is unfortunately a hub for this despicable crime. Most people are not aware that modern day slavery occurs right here in the United States. Many people think this is a myth, not a fact and that it couldn't happen here. But the problem is very real, especially amongst vulnerable youth in the child welfare system.

Let me tell you the story of Anna, a survivor who was brave enough to tell her story, which I heard from Shared Hope International. After Anna's family passed away, she was placed in the foster care system at the age of three. She was shuffled from home to home until age 12 when she was finally adopted by a loving family. As a typical pre-teen, she did not like her family's rules. She hung out at the corner store where she could break the rules and eat junk food without her family knowing. There, she made a friend whom she thought she could trust. Little did she know that the "friend" she met at the corner store was not actually a friend at all.

One day, when she got into a fight with her parents, as teenagers do, she called her "friend" from the store, who promptly picked her up. Anna didn't know that this call would change her life forever. Her "friend" was actually a trafficker. He was violent. He beat her and sold her body. She feared running away or putting up a fight because he threatened her family's lives. So she stayed. And the emotional, physical and sexual abuse continued. Anna became convinced that her family no longer wanted her. She felt helpless and scared.

After almost four years of this unspeakable abuse, Anna eventually escaped and was reunited with her family. Through strength, a resilient spirit, and with the help of her mother, Anna vowed to make a difference one victim at a time. She now has a ministry for sex trafficking survivors and runs an outreach program for at-risk youth.

Unfortunately, Anna's story is not unique. The scars from the foster care system stayed with her and made her vulnerable to trafficking. Many foster youth have experienced neglect, physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. These factors make children more susceptible to trafficking. The child welfare system has tremendous challenges and one major challenge is to not only put a roof over a child's head, but to instill values – like self-worth – in each child. And, it must educate its staff and families to identify child trafficking victims.

I will soon introduce the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act with Congresswoman Maloney. The companion will be offered by Senator Cornyn and Senator Wyden. This bill, amongst various other provisions, will create a grant program to help State and local governments develop and implement comprehensive victim-centered programs, including collaborative efforts with child welfare agencies. In addition, the bill creates a “Domestic Trafficking Victims’ Fund” at the Treasury, financed through fines on persons convicted of human trafficking and child exploitation crimes, which the Attorney General can use to fund support programs for victims of human trafficking. Included in the bill are number of other provisions to ensure victims receive justice and traffickers and buyers are prosecuted to the fullest.

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act builds upon the End Sex Trafficking Act, which I introduced earlier this year. In Economics 101, we all learned that the key to a successful business is demand. The bill will help combat human trafficking by targeting the criminals who purchase sexual acts and ensuring they are prosecuted as human traffickers. The human trafficking “business” is no different. In order to eliminate it, we must target and penalize the buyers, the sick individuals who buy young women. They are criminals and they must be treated as such.

The engagement of the child welfare system is critical in curbing this crime and ensuring victims are identified and directed to restorative services. I commend you for holding this hearing today. It is important for Congress to examine and help our children in the child welfare and foster care system. With all of the challenges that they face, we must help ensure that they are not falsely led into a dangerous, vicious human trafficking ring. Unless we talk about this issue and fight against this crime, it will never end.

And that’s just the way it is.