

Rep. Paulsen Testimony  
Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee  
October 23, 2013

Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett; I want to thank you for holding this hearing today and bringing light to an issue that is all too often ignored.

It's easy and comfortable to think that sex trafficking only happens outside of the U.S. But, the truth is the exploitation of our children happens every day all across this country, and even in our own backyards.

I recently visited Breaking Free, a Minnesota organization run by a survivor of trafficking, whose mission is to educate and provide services to women and girls who have been the victims of abuse and commercial sexual exploitation.

While there, I had the opportunity to meet with victims and hear their stories. I also learned that Breaking Free has beds that are exclusively used for child trafficking victims. I was shocked to learn these beds are full almost every night and they are looking for additional capacity.

The Department of Justice reports that between 2008-2010, 83% of sex trafficking victims found within the United States were U.S. citizens, and the average age of a girl's entry into prostitution/sex trafficking is 12 -14 years old.

Sadly, the foster care system is ripe with opportunity for predators to exploit these young girls.

Recently the Chicago Tribune reported how group facilities are a breeding ground for the recruitment of child prostitutes. Quote, "because many girls in foster care feel starved for a sense of family, experts say it is not uncommon for pimps to target group homes and groom girls for prostitution by giving them attention and gifts. They often let the girls think they are dating, and use one foster child to recruit others."

Youth who have been involved in the foster care system are also more likely to become runaways or to become homeless at an early age.

Minneapolis Police Sgt. Grant Snyder who works fulltime fighting youth prostitution and trafficking reports "...that there is a very strong connection between runaways and homeless youth and sex trafficking victims. All of our trafficking victims are part of that population."

And youth who age out of the foster care system often have little or no income support, limited housing options and are at higher risk to end up on the streets. Youth that live in residential or institutional facilities often become homeless upon discharge.

Sadly, the consequences for these children are dire. Girls who become victims of sex trafficking face a range of both physical and mental maladies including reproductive health issues, pain, weight loss, depression, PTSD, anxiety disorders and suicidal thoughts.

When I talk to experts, over and over again they say there is a general lack of understanding of the problems, and therefore the victims aren't getting the proper services and care they need.

Earlier this week I met with Ramsey County Attorney John Choi. He said that like domestic violence decades ago, child sex trafficking is not getting the attention it needs. There is not a strong awareness of the youth trafficking problem. People don't know that it is going on and therefore don't know what to look for.

He went on to say that in order to prevent youths from becoming victims of sex trafficking, we need better information as to what is happening, where, and to whom. We need to identify trends and help fill in the gaps.

That is why earlier this year I introduced bipartisan legislation along with Rep. Slaughter to help provide reliable data, particularly as it relates to children in the child welfare system.

It takes an important first step by requiring that each state's Foster Care and Adoption Assistance plan contains a description of the specific measure taken to provide services to children who are victims of sex trafficking.

It also requires child welfare agencies immediately notify the proper authorities when children go missing – either from their homes or childcare institutions.

This information will go to the FBI where we can keep a comprehensive database.

The bill also will classify these victims as just that – victims – not criminals, which they are sometimes labeled today – we need to make sure that victims are able to come forward without fear of prosecution and given the proper care and protection – not just thrown in jail.

This is an issue that people don't always like to talk about. And while we read stories about it going on in foreign countries, the reality is that it's happening in all of our backyards.

By pooling our resources and gathering ideas and intelligence from as many sources as we can – we can start to fight back and save the lives of these innocent youth.

My legislation is a product of ideas from law enforcement and non-profit organizations that understand the problem, and also know real, practical ways to combat it.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to testify – and commend the committee for bringing up this important topic.