

Amanda Urwiler Testimony 2/19/2014

*Preventing Sex Trafficking and Improving Opportunities for Youth in Foster Care Act*

Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee – Chairman Representative Reichert

Hello Congressman Reichert and Congressman McDermott. Thank you both for your time and effort on the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Improving Opportunities for Youth in Foster Care Act. My name is Mandy Urwiler and I am employed at the Mockingbird Society. I am 19 years old, and I entered foster care when I was 15. I am still in foster care thanks to the Extended Foster Care program.

I could tell several stories about when people tried to get me to turn a trick for them – this was an experience I encountered throughout my young adulthood before, and during my time in foster care. But there is one time in particular I'd like to share.

I was 13 and had just been expelled from my previous school because of complications while running away from home. Consequently, I started attending the Alder Academy in Seattle, which is an alternative school for juvenile court involved youth. I quickly learned that many of my classmates were pimps and drug dealers.

On my second day at the school, they asked me to go be their whore and make them money. They said I could just get the money upfront and run away, but I knew that wouldn't work, and I didn't want to sell my body. I said no, but they kept pushing. After class let out, they followed me home, continuously telling me they needed me to and I could make good money.

The next day, I went to class, and was still being pressured, but I held my ground. This time when class let out for the day, I was beaten brutally for saying no. I was shoved down and kicked while I was on the ground. I was punched and had my head slammed into the ground... But I still said no.

When I went home that night, still being followed by my attackers, I told my dad what happened. That may have been the only time I ever saw my divorced parents

agree on something: to pull me out of that school. I was lucky because, in this case, it was a situation I could get away from.

But not every young person living in foster care or in a group home gets that chance. Leaving your group home is no simple thing – especially when you are a minor and may not have a trusted adult advocating for you. Sometimes, especially if you have run and are living on the streets, the pimps are adult predators who are more sophisticated and brutal than the young group that came after me. And sometimes the youth being pressured simply doesn't have the support wrapped around them to help them resist the way I did.

I saw girls who had run away from their foster homes and were arrested for prostitution. I later talked to them about it and found out they were afraid to leave “the life” because they were beaten and threatened. They weren't given help to escape the clutches of these evil people who hurt them – and they were treated as criminals by the authorities. It's my belief that they were victims. I met these girls who were my age or even younger, and I saw what could have happened to me. I don't want to ever have to see that again because no one should ever have to go through that kind of abuse and criminalization. I don't want anyone else to have to make the choice between severe injury or death and selling their bodies.

This is an epidemic that needs to stop. We say that children who are removed from their families will be safe from further abuse and neglect. So we must protect vulnerable youth in care from predators like the ones who hurt me.

As a strategy for preventing sex trafficking, this bill addresses the topic of Normalcy for foster youth. I am very happy to see that the bill encourages states to adopt a Prudent Parent Standard to support normal life experiences for youth in care. An effort that is already underway here in Washington State.

I believe if youth had more opportunities to do normal things they want to do – and that their peers in healthy families do – without the fear of running into barriers, less youth would run away from care. When I was in my foster home, my foster parents couldn't sign for the simplest of things, like school field trips to job fairs and college tours. My social worker couldn't get back to me in time, so I never got to do those things. This negatively impacted my grades, and I lost opportunities to explore educational and career resources. Even now, I'm struggling to decide on my next step with school. I've thought about pursuing a career in healthcare, trying for a PHD in engineering or theoretical physics, going to law school, or studying public affairs. This may be normal confusion for a 19 year old – but I do believe

that if I had access to the full range of opportunities in school that field trips and other enrichment activities would have given me, I may have a clearer idea of where I am going.

Field trips aren't the only things I missed out on. I never got to spend the night with friends because my foster parents were afraid of the liability. I didn't get my learners permit through the state because they didn't want the liability- I used one of my visits home to have my dad take me to the Department of Licensing (DOL) and sign the form. But even then, I couldn't practice except on my weekly visits because, again, my foster parents were afraid of getting in trouble.

In my experience, the path that leads too many foster youth to be preyed upon is driven by a lack of control, a lack of opportunity and a lack of support. I believe this bill will help youth by giving them more input and control around their case plan, by allowing foster parents to give their youth access to opportunities that are taken for granted by others, and by giving youth who have already started down a dangerous path a way out. I ask the subcommittee to maintain its commitment to the pieces of this bill that reinforce control, opportunity and support for youth in care.