



KING COUNTY

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Testimony of Sheriff John Urquhart for the February, 19, 2014 hearing on Human Trafficking at the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee of Ways and Means

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am very honored to appear today before this committee. The trafficking of our youth is an abhorrent practice, and the issue is long overdue for the type of publicity and exposure it seems to finally be receiving.

While anyone of any age can be trafficked, the legislation we're here to discuss today focuses on a subset of youth, girls *and* boys, who are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of this form of modern-day slavery.

Mr. Chair, I have been a police officer for 38 years. You were my sergeant back when I first joined the Sheriff's Office as a full-time deputy, and as we both know, society did not always view those trapped in the sex trade as victims. We had other words for them: hooker, prostitute, and street walker to name a few. Sure, we arrested and investigated the johns who were out there soliciting, but you and I both know it was much easier to make a case against the women on the street.

I spent a lot of time on patrol and as a vice detective on the streets of what is now the City of SeaTac investigating and arresting people for prostitution. Those were my marching orders. In fact, one of the main arguments made for SeaTac's incorporation as a city at the time was to get a better handle on the quote, "problem", of prostitution. And it was simple, and it was the right thing to do, because they were breaking the law...right?

Mr. Chair, those days do not stir up feelings of nostalgia inside of me.

As society evolves, as the people evolve, so must law enforcement evolve. Thankfully this groundswell of evolution has occurred in Washington State at all levels of government.

For years the Office of the Attorney General, through two administrations, has made fighting human trafficking one of its top priorities. Locally, the King County Council has allocated specific funding to Public Health and to the Sheriff's Office to raise awareness about and to investigate human trafficking. King County Superior Court Judge Barbara Mack is chairing the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) Task Force to develop and implement a coordinated, county wide response to childhood prostitution. The King County Prosecutor takes cases of human trafficking very seriously, and even obtained Washington State's first conviction under our Human Trafficking statute.

And my patrol deputies and detectives in the Sheriff's Office place a high priority on locating and rescuing those who have been coerced or otherwise trafficked against their will. Last year, we implemented mandatory training for all commissioned personnel to recognize the signs of human trafficking in those we come in contact with. My deputies now have a broader base of resources for which to refer victims of trafficking for better support. And every day we are partnering with the federal government on joint task forces to fight human trafficking. We constantly share information and resources with the U.S. Attorney's Office, because often times investigating the perpetrators of human trafficking takes us across jurisdictional boundaries.

Mr. Chair, the legislation discussed today addresses a systemic failure for our children who have no choice but to depend on the state for their welfare. As you, yourself, have quoted, 59 percent of juveniles arrested in Los Angeles for prostitution were in the foster care system. 60 percent of child sex trafficking victims were in foster care or group homes when they ran away. These statistics are simply astounding. They came as a surprise to me, but I'm not so sure the numbers surprised everyone in this room.

This room is filled with service providers who have spent years trying to convince the public that the vast majority of those involved in the sex trade have been victims of abuse in the past, making them that much more susceptible for continued abuse. There is nothing voluntary about a child who has engaged in survival sex. There is nothing voluntary about a woman whose pimp coerces and pressures her into engaging in sex for money, just to have that same pimp keep the proceeds. And there is absolutely nothing voluntary about any adult paying any child for sex.

I spoke earlier about a certain level of callousness law enforcement used to have for victims caught up in the sex trade. Thankfully, Mr. Chair, I suspect you were ahead of the times in those days. One has to only know your personal history as a runaway, or to have watched the level of compassion and determination for justice you showed for the victims of the Green River Killer to know that this issue has been and will always be near and dear to your heart.

No, I'm not nostalgic for those days. But putting them into perspective shows how far we have all come in recognizing and fighting human trafficking. Simply put, this legislation will save lives, and I thank you for taking up this cause.

Thank you.