



**Testimony by Mr. Don Knabe
Supervisor, Fourth District
Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors**

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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**Hearing: "Local and Private Sector Initiatives to Combat International
Human Trafficking"**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for your leadership in raising awareness of the horrific issue of child sex trafficking around the globe. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Don Knabe and I serve as Los Angeles County Supervisor for the Fourth District. Los Angeles County is the largest county in the nation, with over 10 million residents. In my district alone, I represent over two million people.

I have been honored to serve Los Angeles County for nearly 20 years. While the County serves as the ultimate safety net for those most in need, never in my time in office have I heard an issue as shocking and disturbing as what is happening to young girls right here in our streets in America.

About 18 months ago, staff from our Probation Department came to me to discuss what they were seeing as an escalating problem in our juvenile justice system – young girls being arrested for prostitution. While society often characterizes it as a choice, the average age of entry into prostitution is 12 to 13.

Shortly after our initial meeting, at a fundraising event for survivor programs, one of our Probation officers was notified that a 10 year-old had just been taken into custody for prostitution at 6pm on a Tuesday evening. No 10 year-old little girl is choosing that life!

In the year and a half since we began proactively addressing the sexual exploitation of children, we have gained significant insight into this issue, while recognizing we have a long journey ahead to protect these girls and prevent this heinous crime.

Today, I would like to talk to you about our efforts to combat child sex trafficking and the intersection of international and local efforts to safeguard our most vulnerable young people.

Los Angeles County is recognized as one of the hubs for sex trafficking in the nation. With our two major ports, airport and proximity to the border, we are particularly vulnerable, though we are not alone. Big cities and small towns across this nation are waking up to the horror that young girls are being trafficked across city limits, state lines and country borders.

Despite the varying locations, however, the story of these girls is much the same. Children who fall victim to predatory adults who sexually exploit them for commercial gain are often in the streets because of abuse or neglect at home. The trafficker, or pimp as they are often called in the U.S., promises love, family, a job, security.

In Los Angeles, our infamous gangs, many of which have international connections, are increasingly engaged in child sex trafficking because it is safer for them to sell a girl than drugs or guns, and frankly, it can be more profitable. Once put to work in the streets, a girl can be given a quota of \$500 or more a night, which could lead to eight to ten or more sexual acts a night, which she must meet or risk brutal violence.

A young girl has suffered in her own home and then moves to a life on the streets where she is further victimized. A road out seems impossible. The pimp coerces her emotionally or physically, either by convincing her that what she has done will make her a societal outcast, or by threatening her or her family with violence. Indeed, these threats are very legitimate. One survivor told us of an incident in which several girls were taken to the desert and forced to watch as one was burned to death for attempting to run away.

As we see patterns in child sex trafficking across geography, we must also develop models for protection and prevention, by working together across levels of government and with NGOs, both here and internationally.

For us in Los Angeles County, it started with building awareness. I would argue that there is some public knowledge of human trafficking, but to most people, it is happening “over there” in some distant foreign country, not here in our communities. I admit that I, too, was guilty of that assumption. So we began our efforts with a focus on several levels of outreach.

As a County Board Supervisor, I also sit on our Metropolitan Transit Authority Board. Last year, we launched a campaign to post information, in English and Spanish, about sexually-trafficked youth on all 3,000 Metro buses, on rail cars, trains, and at stations, and on all Metrolink trains (which cross county borders) to shine a light on this travesty in those places where we believe young people are most vulnerable (a copy is included with this testimony).

I was pleased that the private sector voluntarily joined us in our efforts. Clear Channel and Lamar Advertising donated over 100 billboards and 50 digital displays to show the advertisement across Los Angeles County (a copy is included with this testimony).

We also created a video called *Manipulated*, to tell the story of child sex trafficking through the eyes of a survivor and an undercover officer. It has had over 40,000 hits and has been viewed in 171 countries (a copy is included with this testimony).

Raising awareness, however, is not just about the public. Through a federal grant, we have trained over 1600 people, including judges, attorneys, community partners, county staff and other stakeholders who regularly come in contact with victims. Similarly, we would like to help medical professionals in emergency rooms and rape crisis centers see the warning signs.

Through another federal grant, we established a Collaborative Court to focus specifically on the victims of child sex trafficking. As it is a misdemeanor charge, the children arrested for prostitution are often released, with their pimp waiting outside the courthouse doors. Through the Court, we are able to provide the young girls with a victim-centered response team to help them with their physical and mental health issues, and to support them with housing, education and training services.

Last summer, Los Angeles County hosted the first national Empowerment Conference, “Inspiring Hope through Survivor Leadership,” for the victims and at-risk girls to help them overcome their challenges, heal their wounds and look towards the future. In fact, five of those young women are here in Washington, D.C. this week to advocate on behalf of all victims of human trafficking.

Of course, helping the victims is critical, but we must also find ways to prevent this atrocity altogether. We are beginning to build partnerships with local school districts to bring a preventive curriculum we are using in our probation halls, *My Life, My Choice*, to select middle schools where we know exploitation is highest.

As the largest county in the nation, I believe it is our duty to share our knowledge, experiences and programs with other jurisdictions. Earlier this year, we hosted the National Association of Counties’ Smart Justice Symposium. Our County Probation Department and Juvenile Court officials joined with Homeland Security and the FBI to share information with large and small counties across the United States.

While survivor and prevention programs are fundamental, legislative action is necessary to punish the true criminals and defend the victims. Last year, the voters of California overwhelmingly passed the CASE Act, the toughest human trafficking law in the country. It will strengthen penalties and increase prison terms for human traffickers and protect sexually exploited children. Two pieces of legislation have also been introduced to add pimping, pandering and human trafficking to the list of crimes associated with gang activity, and to help us better assist children in these circumstances who are in our foster care system.

It’s been 18 months since we started on this journey in Los Angeles County. I am proud of what our County staff has accomplished and pleased that we have had support from our federal partners and the private sector.

The voices of abused children often remain silent. In the past, young girls arrested for prostitution were judged by society, exactly as their pimps predicted. The pimp life, outrageously, has been celebrated. Through education, survivor and prevention programs, and legislation, we will reverse this injustice. Young girls, those we are responsible to protect, will know that, no matter where they are from or how they have been trafficked, they are the true victims. But that we are here for support, to help them realize their lives are valuable and that they are worthy of the dreams they once imagined.

We must do everything we can to get these girls off the track and on a path to a better life ahead and together say, “No more; not in our streets; not to our young girls.”

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today.



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