



Testimony of Melinda Giovengo, PhD

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U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources Hearing on  
*Protecting Vulnerable Children: Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking  
of Youth in Foster Care*

October 23, 2013

Good afternoon Chairman Reichert and Members of the Subcommittee. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee on this important topic. My name is Melinda Giovengo and I am the Executive Director of YouthCare located in Seattle, Washington.

Since 1974, YouthCare has been a leader in providing effective services to help Seattle's homeless youth get off the streets and prepare for life. These services include street outreach and basic needs, shelter and housing, and education and employment training. Our agency's dynamic programming and collaborations serve as a model for working with runaway, homeless, and sexually exploited youth both locally and nationwide. In 39 years of working with runaway and homeless youth, YouthCare has developed successful, research-informed strategies for assessing and overcoming the challenges these youth face.

Runaway and homeless youth are at high risk of sexual exploitation. A recent study found that approximately one in four youth (23%) had experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking prior to entering services<sup>1</sup>. To better serve our clients, YouthCare operates the Bridge Continuum of Services for Sexually Exploited Youth, consisting of identification and outreach strategies, community-based advocates, education, employment training, emergency shelter, and long term housing. These services identify and stabilize young people in crisis, create opportunities for YouthCare staff to build rapport with clients and offer them long-term solutions to the devastating harm of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

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<sup>1</sup> Bigelson, J. & Vuotto, S. "Homelessness, Survival Sex and Human Trafficking: As Experienced by the Youth of Covenant House in New York City" (2013).

Seattle, King County has one of the largest homeless youth populations in the U.S.; the City of Seattle estimates there are between 700 and 1,000 homeless youth on the streets every night. The Seattle area also has a significant problem with the sexual exploitation and trafficking of youth. A 2008 study in King County conducted by Dr. Debra Boyer identified 238 unduplicated minors involved in prostitution, and determined the prevalence of sexually exploited youth in King County to be estimated between 300 and 500 youth per year.<sup>2</sup>

The long-term risks for youth in foster care are well documented, but it is only in recent years that the prevalence of sex trafficking among youth in foster care has been widely recognized. Many of the runaway and homeless youth served at YouthCare are part of the foster care system, or have aged out, and even more have histories of involvement with Child Welfare through CPS reports and investigations. We see youth each day who are being trafficked and exploited who are “system involved” and for whom the system has failed. It is this system involvement, combined with their runaway or homeless status, which makes them uniquely vulnerable to pimps and traffickers. Today I will highlight five key issues and offer recommendations to address each of these areas.

### **Five Key Issues and Recommendations for Improving Identification and Responses to Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care:**

1. Youth in foster care are disproportionately at risk for victimization through sex trafficking due to prior abuse and a lack of social/familial support. Furthermore, sex trafficking constitutes violence and abuse of vulnerable youth.
2. Youth in foster care are often victims of sex trafficking long before social workers, foster parents or other providers are aware. There is a need for increased measures to identify youth in foster care who are victims of trafficking, including broad-based training for Child Welfare leadership, staff, foster care, and residential providers.
3. Youth who have run away, or are missing from care, are at significant risk for sex trafficking. There is a need for increased efforts to locate youth who are missing from the foster care system, individualized strategies to enhance placement stability, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Boyer, Debra, “Who Pays the Price: An Assessment of Youth Involvement in Prostitution in Seattle” (2008), Report commissioned for the City of Seattle, Human Services Department.

improved ability of federally-funded RHY programs to provide short- or long-term placement option to youth in foster care.

4. The scope and prevalence of sex trafficking of youth in foster care is not systematically tracked or quantified, and the lack of data is a significant barrier to an effective response.
5. Responses to sex trafficking at the state and local levels are varied and inconsistent. This inconsistency is due in part to differences in language and interpretation of the definitions of custodial abuse/neglect within state Child Welfare charters.

***Issue #1 – Youth in foster care are disproportionately at risk for victimization through sex trafficking due to prior abuse and a lack of social/familial support, and frequency of running away.***

There are numerous studies that document the frequency of childhood sexual and physical abuse in individuals that later become involved in prostitution.<sup>3 4 5</sup> Studies indicate that between 55% and 90% of prostituted individuals report a history of child sexual and/or physical abuse. There is also substantial anecdotal evidence, and consensus among service providers who have worked with victims of trafficking, that childhood sexual abuse and parental absence or neglect are common occurrences in the early lives of these youth. It is also well documented that running away is an indicator of potential trafficking and exploitation, and that recruitment into prostitution and sex trafficking often occur while youth are missing from care. The harm and neglect that lead children in to foster care in the first place are compounded with the conditions of unstable placement and subsequent running away. This creates a pool of “perfect targets” for pimps and traffickers.

***Recommendation - YouthCare recommends that Child Welfare Agencies create a strategic plan for how prevent trafficking among youth in care and identify and respond to youth who do become victims of sex trafficking.***

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<sup>3</sup> Boyer, Debra and James, Jennifer, “Sex and Social Order: The Prostitute as Victim”, *Deviance and Victimology* (1983). D. MacNamara and A. Karmen, Eds., Sage Annual Review of Studies in Deviance Vol. 7, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Farley, M. & Barkan, H. “Prostitution, Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” (1998). *Women & Health* 27: 37-49.

<sup>5</sup> Silbert, M.H. & Pines, A. M. (1983). Early Sexual Exploitation as an Influence in Prostitution. *Social Work* 28: 285-289.

**Issue #2- Youth in foster care are often victims of sex trafficking long before social workers, foster parent or other providers are aware.**

In recent years, many communities have begun training law enforcement, youth providers, and first responders to identify and respond to victims of trafficking and exploitation. Washington State has been recognized as a leader in such efforts. Under the leadership of the Center for Children and Youth Justice (CCYJ), located in Seattle, WA, YouthCare has been instrumental in developing a model statewide protocol to respond to youth experiencing sexual exploitation and trafficking. YouthCare has also provided substantial training and technical assistance across the state to implement the model protocol to create consistent, victim-centered responses throughout Washington. Child Welfare has been actively involved in this process in our state. This model protocol, and related training and technical assistance efforts, demonstrate the need and the possibilities for regional and statewide multi-systemic responses.

***Recommendation** - YouthCare recommends that screening, intake and on-going service planning should include measures to screen for indicators for trafficking (such as childhood sexual abuse). We further recommend that all Child Welfare staff and foster parents receive mandatory training on identifying and responding to sex trafficking and that specific resources to meet the needs of victims be made available to foster parents and social work staff. Finally, we recommend that Child Welfare agencies participate in regional task forces or protocol development efforts to respond to sex trafficking.*

**Issue #3 – State-dependent youth who are missing from care cannot legally be housed in a homeless youth program receiving federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) or HUD funds.**

Youth who are “on the run” who also have a history of abuse and trauma and poor familial/social support are the single most vulnerable group to fall prey to sex trafficking. The potential for recruitment is very high once youth have run from care. Social workers need to provide targeted interventions to reduce the potential reasons for running as well as working to establish strong nurturing connections for their youth. Child Welfare agencies need to prioritize the work of locating young people who are missing from care and dedicate resources to that effort.

State-dependent youth cannot legally be housed in a homeless youth program receiving federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) or HUD funds. Many of these housing programs are designed to meet the needs of youth with trauma, runaway histories, and/or sexual exploitation, but because of these funding barriers, they are inaccessible to youth still in state care. For example, several of YouthCare's transitional living programs have dedicated beds for youth who have experienced sexual exploitation, but we cannot use RHY or HUD funds to support youth in care in these beds.

***Recommendation-** YouthCare recommends that increased efforts should be taken to track and locate youth who are missing from care through use of dedicated staff and collaborations with law enforcement and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. It is recommend specific strategies to prevent and reduce running behaviors be implemented as well as debriefing all run away incidents once youth are located and creating individualized plans to minimize running behaviors. Finally, we recommend that the RHY language be amended to allow provision of services to state-dependent youth if in-home placement is deemed inappropriate.*

**Issue #4- The scope and prevalence of sex trafficking of youth in foster care is not systematically tracked or quantified and the lack of data is a significant barrier to effective response.**

In order to effectively address any problem, we must first understand its scope and boundaries. It is well recognized in efforts to address human trafficking that there is a significant lack of data. In order to create high quality and effective responses we must know how many youth are victims, what the nature of that victimization looks like and what the long-term, developmental and cognitive impacts of being victimized through sex trafficking are. There is a broad array of research needed to truly understand the scope and consequences of this issue. However, a good start would be simply to get an accurate representation of how many youth are being trafficked for sex and how many of those youth are in the foster care system.

***Recommendation-** Data collection strategies should be implemented to accurately quantify how many youth in the foster care system are victims of sex trafficking.*

***Issue #5 – Responses to sex trafficking at the state and local levels are varied and inconsistent.***

Child abuse and neglect is typically defined as neglect or harm caused by a “parent, guardian or caregiver.” The result of this definition is that when non-custodial individuals (such as pimps, traffickers or buyers of sex) abuse children, it is often deemed outside the jurisdiction of Child Protective Services to investigate. In some cases the report may be referred to law enforcement for investigation instead. However, sex trafficking is inherently a form of child abuse and as such, Child Welfare should have a response in both their investigation and long-term care divisions.

***Recommendation - YouthCare recommends that policies be enacted whereby allegations of sex trafficking are automatically screened in for investigation by Child Protective Services and that the definition of abuse and neglect is expanded to reflect the abuse and harm caused by pimps, traffickers, buyers of commercial sex or other non-custodial perpetrators accessing children through the commercial sex trade.***

Youth in foster care are at significant risk for many damaging and impactful outcomes, not least of which is victimization through sex trafficking. Significant resources and strategies should be vetted and implemented in order to identify victims and increase the capacity of Child Welfare agencies to protect youth from these harmful and devastating experiences.

I would like to sincerely thank the Subcommittee for its interest in hearing YouthCare’s recommendations for improving the Child Welfare system’s response to sex trafficking of youth in foster care.

In closing, we deeply appreciate the dedication of this Subcommittee to provide leadership and a bipartisan commitment to combating sex trafficking. We look forward to your continued efforts and collaboration and are honored to be a resource in any way necessary as you move forward on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Melinda Giovengo, PhD