

United States House of Representatives

Committee on Ways and Means

Subcommittee on Human Resources

**Hearing on Protecting Vulnerable Children: Preventing Sex
Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care**

October 23, 2013

**Witness: Withelma “T” Ortiz Walker Pettigrew
Human Rights Project for Girls**

Foster Care Renders Youth within the System More Vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

Thank you Chairman and Members of the Committee for the invitation to be here today. Prior to being a college student, I spent for the most part, the first 18 years of my life in the foster care system. Seven of those years I was a child being sexually trafficked on the streets, internet, strip clubs, massage parlors and even in the back of express papers. Many children, like myself, come from various traumas previously to entering into foster care, and many times, are further exposed to trauma throughout their experience in the foster care system. Although there are many people who uplift the system for its successes, there are many elements within the experience of foster care that make youth more susceptible to being victimized. Youth within the system are more vulnerable to becoming sexually exploited because youth accept and normalize the experience of being used as an object of financial gain by people who are supposed to care for us, we experience various people who control our lives, and we lack the opportunity to gain meaningful relationships and attachments.

In addition, traffickers/pimps/exploiters have no fear of punishment because they rely on the lack of attention that occurs when these young people go missing. Also, these traffickers/pimps/exploiters, depend on the instability of these young people's lives to hide their involvement, which perpetuates the foster children and youth's vulnerability. Many children, myself included, who grow up in foster care express how it is common household knowledge that many caregivers take them in primarily for the paycheck in which they are provided for the purpose of caring for the child. From my own experience and that of others, the money that is given by the state is supposed to be utilized to provide for the child's basic needs-- however the money is often used for other things, specifically for special luxuries for the caretaker and their

biological children and families, unrelated to the financial support of the child it was intended for. These caregivers will make statements like “you’re not my child, I don’t care what’s going on with you, as long as you’re not dead, I’ll continue to get my paycheck.” This “nothing but a paycheck” theory objectifies the youth and the youth begin to normalize the perception that their presence is to be used for financial gain. This creates a mind frame for the youth that their purpose is to bring income into a household. In addition to the statements, the caregiver’s lack of action in times of need, imply to these youth that they are not concerned about what happens to them, as long as the paycheck keeps coming in. Nevertheless, this makes youth feel like an object and less like a person, and for me and many others, youth begin to normalize the behaviors and actions toward them by accepting that their purpose is for the financial benefit of others. Therefore, when youth are approached by traffickers/pimps/exploiters, they don’t see much difference between their purpose of bringing finances into their foster home and bringing money to traffickers/pimps/exploiters’ “stable.”

Traffickers/pimps/exploiters also rely on how so many of us have been sexual abused and molested while in foster care. Back in my day, if I were to report abuse in a placement, I was often moved before it was addressed, only to preserve the opportunity to keep that placement open due to the lack of placements available. Sometimes, specifically more so with private FFA’s (Foster Family Agencies) and sometimes County/State Child Welfare Departments, do not thoroughly investigate caregivers’ background or family household. I once lived in a home in which a younger child and myself were being inappropriately pursued by the foster father. After we reported it, it was found that the FFA wasn’t aware that the foster mother was married and wasn’t aware that the man lived in the home. Furthermore, myself and many others, are stigmatized for reporting abuse. Once a youth makes such a report, that information is transferred

within the disclosing of history to potential placements which makes it harder to place these children and harder for normal treatment within a home due to the fear of us making a “false claim” of sexual misconduct. Lastly, while I was in care, my social workers were aware that I was being exploited and did nothing about it. It is vital that foster children and youth be properly assessed and identified for sexual abuse/exploitation by child welfare agencies as there are many “red flags” that can be noticed if our agencies were supplied with the proper training.

It is also important to point out here the ways in which the foster care system, inadvertently, objectifies the presence of youth for monetary purposes, and it also normalizes the idea to youth that other people are supposed to control their lives and circumstances. The foster care system, in its entirety, serves in the role of the parent so it is never clear to the youth who exactly is in control, or supposed to be in control. Multiple social workers fluctuate in and out of youths’ lives, and they have limited interaction with the youth which leave the children feeling hopeless and without a sense of order. Due to the multiple roles and persons in the foster care system, children and youth become accustomed to others (most of whom are strangers to them) dictating what will happen in their lives at home, in school and socially. Where they live, who they see, and what opportunities are available to them are at the mercy of multiple decisions made by adults with whom they have little or no attachment to. Foster care creates an ever changing environment of youth having to adapt to strangers making their life decisions. This is conducive to the parallel process of traffickers/pimps/exploiters who seek to keep control of a youth's life.

Moreover the foster care system lacks and continues to eclipse opportunities for youth to gain meaningful relationships and attachments. Many foster children and youth switch placements so often that it doesn’t allow us to gain skills to acquire or sustain relationships and

attachments. For others and for myself, opportunities to build these skills such as problem-solving, or what it means to reconcile after an argument, are denied and instead we are just moved to another home. These placement moves take away the opportunity to explore what a healthy relationship is and how to work through problems in a constructive way.

Like me, any youth in foster care, becomes accustomed to adapting to multiple moves from home to home which allows us to easily then adapt to when traffickers/pimps/exploiters move us multiple times, from hotel to hotel, city to city, and/or state to state. For myself, as unfortunate as it is to say, the most consistent relationship I ever had in care was with my pimp and his family.

Ultimately, traffickers/ pimps/exploiters have no fear of punishment because they depend and rely on the lack of attention that occurs when these young people go missing from care. No one looks for us, or keeps us on their radar. The system just makes no effort. There are no amber alerts, no posters, when youth from the foster care system go missing.

Traffickers/pimps/exploiters are aware that when foster youth go missing, it is always assumed by the system that they have willingly run away.

There many opportunities to improve the foster care system so that girls like me, as well as boys, are less vulnerable to traffickers/pimps/exploiters. First, I believe child welfare agencies should be working with local programs which support and provide resources to youth who have been sexually exploited to enhance their responses with working with these youth to transition into a healthier lifestyle. Secondly, these youth should be provided trauma-informed counsel and care at all times, which means that the agencies should be actively working to gain and maintain the resources to do so. Working with these youth for the betterment of their well being also consists of changing protocols in child welfare agencies. These youth should be able to have

someone to call on at all times. The county agencies can set up a 24/7 cell phone hotline (in which the number would never be changed) to connect with a specialist or WOD (worker of the day) to respond and interact with these youth when they reach out. Lastly, child welfare agencies need to figure out how to make these children visible when they go missing. People will not be able to help these youth if they are not made visible. These youth also need to be actively involved in the decision making process of their life circumstances. Positive examples of youth involvement are proven. In California, TDM's (Team Decision Meetings) and in New York, FTC's (Family Team Conferences), are convenings in which many parties vital to the work of the agency, the young people and their families (biological and created) are brought together to make a plan that supports the youth's individual goals and meets the needs of the agencies. I also believe that these youth should be appointed with one person who will follow them throughout placement changes whether it be a CASA or mentor, these youth should have a constant ally throughout their time in care and this person should also be available whether or not a youth is currently in placement.

Finally, we need to ensure that these conversations are followed with Federal action from the input received here today. Personally, I feel there is so much more that can be done; these are just a few places to begin in the longer process of our Federal Government's partnership with nationwide child welfare systems in their effort to end the vulnerability of this population. I would like to thank the Human Rights Project for Girls, as well as the Chairman, and Members of the Committee for taking the time to hear my testimony. Thank you to all who work on behalf of these children. You are appreciated with all you do to end the vulnerability of all children.