

# Protect foster children from sex trafficking: Column

Conna Craig 12:17 p.m. EDT October 23, 2013

*These girls and boys must be better cared for and watched over.*



(Photo: Dennis Drenner for USA TODAY in 2009)

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Recent sting operations revealed that more than half (<http://www.childrensrights.org/news-events/cr-blog/sex-trafficking-sting-shows-foster-children-are-especially-vulnerable/>) of the children being traded for sex come from foster care. The same children identified by our courts as most in need of protection from abuse and neglect are being bought and sold everywhere from truck stops and cheap motels to wealthy suburbs. They are being used, reused, and then discarded like trash.

When the U.S. House Subcommittee on Human Resources holds a hearing Wednesday

(<http://waysandmeans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=355668>) on what can be done to prevent

sex trafficking of youth in foster care it will be taking up an issue that is, tragically, more widespread -- and deeply entrenched -- than most anyone can imagine.

What makes it all the more appalling is that, in the vast majority of cases, no one even looks for these children when they go missing from the system.

"Research shows that most victims of child sex trafficking come straight from the foster care system. This is totally unacceptable," said Rep. Dave Reichert (<http://waysandmeans.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=355663>), R-Wash. -- who called the hearing. "We owe it to them to ensure our nation's foster care system does all it can to protect them from predators so they can live safe, happy, and successful lives. For too many kids in foster care, we are not living up to that promise."

Reichert is absolutely correct. In order to keep the promise we, as a civilized society, have made to our most vulnerable children, we must mandate concrete, actionable steps. To begin with, let's look at what we know: state governments admitted they could not locate 4,973 foster children (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport20.pdf>) at the end of fiscal year 2012. Almost unbelievably, this is one of the numbers ("Status=Runaway") that states provide to secure federal funding.

These are real numbers, representing real children. Is anyone looking for them?

The youth at the highest risk of being lured into sexual slavery fall into several groups. First, those who have run away from "substitute care"—an umbrella term that includes foster care, kinship care, group homes and institutions. Then there are youth who "age out" of care with nowhere to go. Finally, the most overlooked are children missing from care but not formally counted by the state as "abducted" or "runaway."

Children *missing from care* are defined as those whose whereabouts are unknown to their state-appointed caretakers yet their status is not reported to the authorities.

These include children who have been informally (and illegally) returned to a family of origin or "re-homed" with another family (while the foster parents continue to collect payments for a child no longer in their care); children whose overburdened social workers are instructed by supervisors to "check the box" rather than pay actual visits to check on youngsters' safety; and children who walk out of group homes. According to The Oklahoman (<http://newsok.com/missing-78-children-from-oklahoma-department-of-human-services-custody/article/3871014>), youngsters in a foster care shelter were free to leave at any time and "if the child is above the age of 15, or sometimes if they are above the age of 13 and 'seem particularly mature,' the shelter staff will not follow the child nor will the police be called."

If the foster parents and social workers into whose care we are placing abused and neglected children are not keeping track of the children, then who is?

Every caregiver assigned by the state must be required to report every child who has run away or otherwise gone missing (think for a moment of the dangers of online predators alone) to law enforcement within 24 hours. Some foster parents are reluctant to report missing foster children for fear of being judged or even having their biological children taken from them. This is a practice issue that can be addressed in foster parent training and support.

In order for any federal law to stem the tide of foster girls and boys being lured into sexual slavery, several practices need to be implemented right away. Governors must enact executive orders requiring physical proof, such as fingerprints or photographs, of visitation by social workers every 30 days to

children in state-run care. State legislators should extend mandated reporter requirements to include the reporting of children who are missing for 24 hours or more. Every adult who works with children in substitute care must report children who are missing to law enforcement, just as they would their own children.

Wednesday's hearing provides the opportunity to take critical steps toward keeping our promises to at-risk youth, and very likely even saving lives.

Conna Craig is a children's advocate and president of the Policy Institute for Children.

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