

Representative Karen Bass Testimony

“Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care”

October 23, 2013

Acknowledgements

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairman Reichert and Ranking Member Doggett for providing me the opportunity to testify today.

As the Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth, I am very appreciative of your ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for foster youth and families.

Intersection Between of Foster Youth and Trafficking Victims

As I’ve traveled throughout the country as part of the Foster Youth Caucus National Listening Tour, it has been devastating to hear that children involved in the child welfare system — particularly those who experience multiple placements — are especially susceptible to coercion and manipulation by traffickers.

In my hometown of Los Angeles, the Probation Department reports that hundreds of youth have been identified as victims of domestic minor sex trafficking victims since 2010. Of these victims, a total 61% have been identified as foster youth. Furthermore, the Los Angeles STAR court, the specialized collaborative courthouse designed to serve commercially exploited youth, reports that 80% of these girls have been previously involved in the child welfare system. And reports from New York, Connecticut, and Florida have shown similar trends.

Additionally, recent headlines indicate that pimps are now targeting foster youth group homes as hubs to recruit vulnerable girls. And increasingly, gangs are engaging in commercial sexual exploitation too, selling girls in addition to drugs and guns.

Seeking a Solution

It is clear that we need a comprehensive approach to prevent the victimization of our children. Child welfare and law enforcement must work together in a coordinated fashion to meet the needs of young survivors and prevent the exploitation of others.

Unfortunately, the child welfare system as a whole has not truly recognized trafficking as a crisis within the foster care population nor incorporated protocols and systems to address the problem. Few child welfare employees have been adequately trained and prepared to identify or respond to child victims of trafficking. Fewer still have incorporated policies, protocols, and case management techniques to serve this population appropriately. Further, child welfare agencies are not documenting the prevalence of trafficking within the foster care population. Therefore, the scope of the challenge nationwide is unknown.

Legislation: Strengthening Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act

To address these gaps, I have introduced H.R. 1732, the Strengthening Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act, along with my colleague and Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth, Representative Tom Marino.

Primarily, our bill would help establish local plans to combat trafficking as well as and ensure nationwide data collection in three important ways:

- First, by amending Title IVE Foster Care and Adoption State plan requirements, child welfare agencies would identify and document each foster youth victim of trafficking as well as specify whether the child is a victim of sex or labor trafficking.
- Second, the bill requires child welfare agencies to report missing, abducted, or trafficked youth to law enforcement within 72 hours for entry into the National Crime Information Center database. This will encourage child welfare and law enforcement collaboration to prevent trafficking of vulnerable youth.
- Third, the bill amends the Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTA), to ensure that States develop comprehensive, multi-agency plans to identify and provide services to all victims of trafficking – this would be inclusive foster youth as well as other youth who may be commercially exploited. These amendments would also require States to document the number of trafficking victims identified in the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

In addition to local planning and data collection, the bill also directs the Department of Health and Human Services to submit a report to Congress that:

- Outlines the prevalence and trends of trafficking among child welfare youth, both state-by-state and nationwide;
- Develops a proposal to collect annual data from State agencies; and
- Proposes an ongoing method of supporting and monitoring efforts of local child welfare agencies to prevent trafficking and serve victims.

Finally, the Strengthening Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act directs the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to develop and publish guidelines to assist child welfare agencies in serving youth who are victims of trafficking and prevent exploitation of youth at-risk of becoming victims. Although HHS recently released guidance to child welfare agencies on this topic, there is room for additional resources and specific tools. As outlined in the bill, the guidelines would provide:

- Example training materials and screening tools
- Service delivery strategies
- Protocols for effective, cross-system collaboration
- Best practices related to residential placements
- Recommendations for documentation and data collection

Conclusion

In conclusion, we cannot continue to fail our nation's children. As federal legislators, we have a tremendous opportunity to ensure that local plans to prevent exploitation are in place as well as collect the necessary national data to inform future federal strategies. While many of the social services needed to properly serve trafficked youth may require a monetary investment, these first steps do not require additional federal funding.

It has been encouraging to see great momentum on this issue throughout the three years that I have served in Congress. I look forward to working with my colleagues in a bipartisan fashion to move legislation that will prevent exploitation and protect our foster youth from trafficking. This hearing is a great step in the right direction. Thank you.