

Testimony by
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To the Hearing Before the
United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary
Human Trafficking in the United States: Protecting the Victims
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Thank you all, especially Senator Leahy and Senator Grassley, for the opportunity to testify today. At Covenant House we are immensely grateful for the leadership of the United State Senate and the Judiciary Committee. On behalf of Kevin Ryan, the leader of Covenant House International, I extend our deepest appreciation to the Senate women's caucus in this fight against the tragedy of human trafficking, in particular today Senator Klobuchar who has visited our Covenant House program for trafficked children in Mexico City and Senator Feinstein for her many years of strong advocacy for homeless and trafficked children served by Covenant House California in Oakland and Hollywood.

Covenant House was founded in 1972 with the simple, profound mission to help homeless kids escape the street. Today we are the largest charity in the Americas providing loving care and vital services to homeless, abandoned, abused, trafficked and exploited youth. We serve in 27 cities throughout the United States, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Canada, and we serve more than 56,000 young people per year. The majority of our resources across all 6 countries are raised privately from more than 700,000 donors each year, but federal and state governments are important partners in our movement.

I work on the ground floor of Covenant House in New York City, right near Times Square. 350 young people, most between the ages of 16 and 20 call this place home each night.

Once their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter are met, we give our young people comprehensive legal, medical and mental health care, and educational and employment training, among many other services. Soon we will be opening the doors of Aspire House, our new safe house for young trafficking survivors in the New York City area.

One of the young people I've worked with who could qualify for a bed in Aspire House is Kay.¹ Her mother let a man sexually abuse her in exchange for money when Kay was just five years old. Throughout her childhood, Kay's mother's boyfriend, her mother, and Kay's own ex-boyfriend sexually exploited her. She ran away at age 11, and was recruited by pimps, who kept her from going to school, threatened to kill her, and would not let her talk to relatives. When she was 19, Kay escaped her pimp and came to Covenant House.

We must keep kids like Kay safe from the nightmare of human trafficking. We are starting to make progress in other arenas in the fight against trafficking, including investigation, prosecution and services for survivors. But we have largely failed to address prevention. To prevent trafficking, we must understand the pipeline between homelessness and the commercial sexual exploitation of young people. Nothing is more frustrating than to watch the rush of attention and investment in human trafficking initiatives at the same time that programs to shelter and care for runaway and homeless youth at the federal and state levels are reduced or eliminated altogether.

We urge the Senate and House to pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act so that we can help young people before they fall into the hands of vicious predators who prey on homeless youth, on teenagers aging out of the foster care system without families, on young people who feel alone and desperate on the streets of America. While any one

¹ The name has been changed to protect the survivor's identity.

of our children could be a victim of human trafficking, we know pimps target the most vulnerable among us, particularly homeless youth with no families to protect them, children from foster care, and those who have been previously sexually abused.

With Fordham University, our research team at Covenant House New York interviewed a random sample of close to 200 of our youth in 2013 about their trafficking experiences. The results were stunning.

Almost 15% of the young people had experiences that fit the federal definition of trafficking, and another almost 10% engaged in survival sex, which meant that they felt so desperate they believed they had no other choice but to sell or trade their bodies in exchange for basic needs, such as food or shelter. These numbers are conservative, as some youth may have been too traumatized to disclose their experiences. If these numbers were to hold for the 3000 youth served just by one of our programs each year – that is, the young people at Covenant House New York – we would expect to serve approximately 750 youth each year who have either been victims of sex trafficking or engaged in survival sex. That is in just one building, on one block, in one city.

Although our sample size is very small, we believe LGBTQ youth are at even higher risk for trafficking. All four of the transgender youth we spoke with had been involved in commercial sex. They explained how after being kicked out of their family home, they had nowhere to go, and no one would hire them for anything but sex work.

When we asked the trafficking survivors what could have prevented these experiences, they were clear: a safe place to stay, someone who cared about them, and job skills that could get them out of the life of stripping and prostitution.

Our study's results are consistent with a multi-city study in the American Journal of Public Health, in which less than 4% of all adolescents exchange sex for money, compared to 28% of youth living on the street, who engage in "survival sex" in exchange for food, shelter or money.

To prevent human trafficking of our nation's children and youth, we need to reduce the supply of homeless young people. To keep pimps and johns from traumatizing vulnerable kids, we need to keep those kids safe, and give them opportunities for hope. To fight trafficking, we need more safe shelters, specifically for youth, filled with caring adults. Over the next 5 years, Covenant House International plans to expand our presence to new cities in the United States and to substantially grow the number of supported beds we can offer homeless and trafficked youth. We urge the Congress to join this movement, and build a stronger safety net for homeless youth to prevent the calamity of child and youth trafficking within our nation.

On a daily basis young people across the country avoid the hands of traffickers by making it to youth shelters filled with comprehensive, holistic services that offer trauma-informed care; some of these programs even receive Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth funds. These shelters allow young adults to transition into independent adults with bright futures.

Unfortunately, these youth shelters are full. In October, the Federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families, released a study showing that 53 percent of homeless kids cannot find places to sleep because shelters are full. Day after day my colleagues in this work around the country have no beds to offer. Our hearts break when we turn a kid away, because we know traffickers congregate where homeless youth do, offering free pizza, soda and pretend affection.

If a homeless youth is denied services due to insufficient resources, there will be a trafficker lying in wait to enslave him or her.

We need to do our best to take away pimps' ability to force our children to choose between selling their bodies and having a place to sleep. To do that, we need to work toward the goal of ensuring that every homeless young person has access to safe beds and services.

An important first step toward that goal is passing the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. We have evidence that programs funded by this act work well to give vulnerable young people the bright futures they deserve: In 2013, 94% of young people who stayed in Basic Center Programs (BCP) and 88% of youth in Transitional Living Programs (TLP) exited into safe environments, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Those young people are far less likely to be sexually exploited.

I join with many other advocates for trafficked youth in supporting this act. Clearly, combating youth homelessness is tantamount to preventing human trafficking. We will never win this war against human trafficking within our borders unless we first win the war to end youth homelessness.