

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins  
Senate Judiciary Committee  
Hearing: *Human Trafficking in the United States: Protecting the Victims*  
February 24, 2015

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Leahy, thank you for convening this important hearing and for inviting me to testify. I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues – Senator Mikulski, Senator Ayotte, and Senator Gillibrand – whom I know share my concern about the horrific problem of sex trafficking in the United States.

No state is immune from the evils of sex trafficking. Traffickers lure vulnerable victims with the promises of a better life and use violence, threats, lies, money, drugs, and other forms of coercion to trap them in a life of commercial sex. Many criminals who once worked in drugs have now turned to sex trafficking because it is more profitable.

The stories of victims are shocking. Just this past January, police in Bangor, Maine, arrested a man and woman for trafficking a 13-year-old girl. This child, who was listed as a missing person, was being sold for sex through ads on the Internet. Unfortunately, there are many cases like this occurring across the country.

I would like to share with you another story from Maine, which helps illustrate both the harrowing experiences faced by young sex trafficking victims and the importance of service providers in changing the course of the survivor's life.

In 2013, Preble Street, an organization that operates a homeless shelter and teen center in Portland, Maine, formed the Preble Street Anti-Trafficking Coalition – a group of outreach, health, case management, and legal service providers. With the support of a Department of Justice grant, this Coalition has brought together organizations such as Catholic Charities of Maine, the Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine, and the U.S. Attorney's office. It is currently working with approximately 50 sex and labor trafficking victims, whose ages range from 15 to 42.

One young woman, now 20-years-old, had been a familiar face around the Preble Street Teen Center. She was in and out of the foster care system, and met other girls who introduced her to “survival sex” – a way to trade sex for a place to sleep and other basic necessities.

At age 16, she traded sex for a ride to Boston. Once in Boston, she met a man who prostituted her to other men, in Boston and back in Maine. She was sold to other pimps and endured physical abuse and violence for many years. When she eventually escaped and her traffickers were charged by police, she had nowhere to go but the local homeless shelter. In fact, police chiefs, prosecutors, and service providers in Maine tell me that the lack of aftercare services, including a safe place to sleep, is among the greatest challenges that victims face.

Today, the Preble Street Anti-Trafficking Coalition is helping this young woman and others like her start a new life. She is doing well and was able to testify against her trafficker in court – a very brave and harrowing ordeal for a victim.

It is not surprising that Portland's homeless shelter is a critical partner in the fight to end human trafficking. Homeless youth, in particular, are more likely to fall victim to sexual exploitation. According to a report prepared by Covenant House, the largest privately funded charity providing services to homeless and exploited youth, approximately one in four homeless youth are victims of sex trafficking or engage in survival sex, and 48 percent of youth have done so because they did not have a safe place to stay.

These statistics are compelling, and the stories of young trafficking victims, many of whom are among our nation's homeless, are particularly devastating. This is why I am proud to join Ranking Member Leahy in reintroducing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Trafficking Prevention Act this Congress.

Our bill reauthorizes those critical preventive and treatment services that help homeless youth around the country. The Street Outreach Program, Basic Center Programs, and Transitional Living Program have helped thousands of young homeless men and women meet their immediate needs and provided long-term residential services for those who cannot be safely reunified with family. Homeless youth need access to safe beds at night and services during the day so that they never have to choose between selling their bodies and a safe place to sleep. I hope this Committee will reauthorize these programs, which for 40 years have helped protect our most vulnerable children.

Mr. Chairman, I applaud this Committee's work in shining a light on some of the darkest stories imaginable. Many states are doing their part, including Maine, where the "Not Here" Justice in Action Network brings together law enforcement and service providers to raise awareness about trafficking. Maine's Sex Trafficking Action Response Team and the Attorney General's Human Trafficking Workgroup also provide statewide platforms for sharing resources.

Congress must do more to provide law enforcement with the tools it needs to pursue sex trafficking and to support those preventive programs that help vulnerable women and men who fall victim to trafficking.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.