

Written Testimony of Julia Einbond, Chief Executive Officer, Covenant House New Jersey

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Counterterrorism

Hearing: "Lost and Exploited: Confronting Child Trafficking and the Failure to Protect America's Most Vulnerable"

Chairman Hawley, Ranking Member Durbin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Chairman Hawley, we are grateful for your leadership and for your representation of Missouri, where Covenant House serves vulnerable youth in the St. Louis area. Ranking Member Durbin, thank you for your longstanding bipartisan commitment to protecting children and families. Senator Booker, Covenant House New Jersey is fortunate to have you as a strong advocate for the thousands of youth facing homelessness and trafficking we have served during your tenure. We are also grateful to Senators Cornyn and Cruz of Texas, whose state is home to Covenant House programs.

I am the CEO of Covenant House New Jersey and appear before you additionally on behalf of Covenant House International, the largest charitable organization in the Americas serving youth overcoming homelessness, including survivors of human trafficking. For more than fifty years, Covenant House has provided refuge and opportunity to youth with nowhere else to turn. Today, our network reaches more than 63,000 youth annually across five countries, offering housing, education, workforce development, mental health services, legal support, and trauma-informed care. Last year alone, we reached more than 2,000 of those youth at Covenant House New Jersey.

In New Jersey, we are designated by the Office of the Attorney General as the statewide coordinator of human trafficking victim services — serving individuals regardless of housing status or age. In the last five years, we have identified and served over 500 survivors of human trafficking. One in four of those individuals experienced child trafficking.

In addition to my service provider role, I am a licensed attorney, a four-times published author of peer-reviewed journal articles on human trafficking, and a consultant for the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center. In partnership with researchers from Mount

Sinai Hospital, I co-developed the first scientifically validated screening tool for sex and labor trafficking. I was invited to present at the American Public Health Association conference ten years ago when human trafficking was first formally named a public health issue, and our work has been cited around the globe.

I see firsthand how we have failed to protect America's most vulnerable children.

Imagine the threat a child must feel to believe — even for that one fateful moment — that a trafficker is their best or only option. Now imagine how different that child's life could be if every child in America had a stable home, food, and a safe support system — not as a recourse after the unimaginable has occurred, but as a baseline of what it means to grow up in this country. Human trafficking is not an aberration that arrives without warning. It is the predictable consequence of unmet need, and we have the tools to interrupt it.

I would like to tell you about Brandon. To protect his privacy, I have changed some details of his story.

Brandon's story began before he was old enough to understand what was happening to him. At four years old, he was sleeping on park benches with his mother and siblings before being removed from her care and placed in foster care for neglect. His first placement — a children's shelter — was marked by emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. By the age of seven, he had begun selling drugs, believing it would give him some measure of control and keep him from feeling like a victim.

As a teenager, Brandon stood on street corners with a backpack over his shoulder and a box of candy in his hands, pretending to sell sweets. The candy was a cover. Inside the backpack was crack cocaine that a dealer had forced him to move. When he once miscounted the money he owed, the punishment left him hospitalized with metal pins in his shoulder. He was told he would die if he tried to quit. Brandon was arrested multiple times during these years. His hospitalization and each arrest were opportunities — moments when a trained eye might have recognized that this was not a young criminal, but a child being controlled, exploited, and threatened with his life. No one did. It was not until a foster care caseworker transferred him to a new home hours away, finally breaking the dealer's geographic grip, that Brandon was able to escape. His trafficking was not identified until years later, when he arrived at CHNJ's door as a young adult experiencing homelessness — burdened with experiences as a victim of child trafficking.

Brandon's story is not exceptional. It is a blueprint — a blueprint for how children fall through every gap we have failed to close, and how the consequences of that failure compound across a lifetime.

There are three things this Subcommittee must understand to make progress against child trafficking: vulnerability drives it, early identification stops it, and services at every stage are essential to combating it.

First, vulnerability is the common thread. Human trafficking affects people from all demographic and social groups, and we see this broad range in our work in New Jersey. The connective tissue among victims is not their background — it is their vulnerability. Brandon's path to trafficking was paved long before a dealer ever approached him: by homelessness, by abuse in the very system meant to protect him, by the absence of any stable adult who could offer him a safer sense of control than the one the streets provided. Children who lack housing, family support, and safe community connections are the traffickers' targets. They are not random victims. They are children our systems have already failed to reach, and traffickers fill that void deliberately and ruthlessly. If we want to stop trafficking before it starts, we must treat vulnerability as the crisis.

Second, identification — of vulnerabilities and of trafficking itself — is intervention. We cannot protect children we cannot see. Brandon was arrested multiple times as a child and trafficking was never identified — not once. Every arrest was a missed opportunity to ask a different set of questions, to look beyond the charge and see the child behind it. This is not because the signs were invisible. It is because the systems that encountered Brandon were not trained to recognize them, were not equipped with validated screening tools, and had no clear protocol for what to do if they had. The research exists, the methods are available; what is missing is the will to deploy them at scale. Screening, training, and universal education tools must be integrated into every system that touches vulnerable youth — juvenile justice, child welfare, schools, and shelters — not as an afterthought, but as standard practice. We know that a youth who is homeless and has a history of arrest is six times more likely to have experienced human trafficking than a youth experiencing homelessness who has not. Brandon was both. No one connected those dots until it was far too late.

Third, services save lives — and the sooner they are provided, the greater their impact. Children want to know how you can help them. Traffickers succeed precisely because they have a ready answer to that question, however coercive and false. Service providers have a better answer, and the sooner we can give it, the better we can protect children. In New Jersey, we are developing a pilot program with law enforcement to screen for trafficking experiences at the point of arrest and divert identified survivors to services rather than criminalization. Had

that program existed when Brandon was first arrested — had there been trauma-informed services, stable housing, and real alternatives ready to meet him — his story might have been interrupted years earlier. These kinds of innovative, collaborative approaches can connect vulnerable young people to support sooner and fundamentally change the landscape of trafficking in our communities. But even with the delay of services until years after his entry into child trafficking, Brandon was able to benefit from service intervention. Brandon was working, was stably housed, had saved over \$4,000, and was waiting to rent his first apartment of his own the last time I saw him.

Law enforcement approaches alone have not ended human trafficking. But scalable, well-funded services can accelerate the fight and make it far harder for traffickers to continue violating our laws and our children with impunity. To that end, I urge this Subcommittee to fund the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. The investment is modest. The stakes could not be higher.

Policy Recommendations

Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYTPA) (S. 2012/H.R. 3856)

As noted earlier, one of the most effective anti-trafficking strategies is preventing youth homelessness. RHYTPA, led by Senators Durbin and Collins, is a bipartisan bill that would reauthorize and modernize the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Among other provisions, this legislation prioritizes street outreach to survivors of sexual abuse and trafficking, requires staff training on trafficking, and supports prevention services.

RHYTPA is prevention infrastructure. It complements this Committee's enforcement focus by reducing the supply of vulnerable youth targeted by traffickers.

Stabilize Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Funding (S. 1892/H.R. 909)

VOCA funding is the lifeline that sustains frontline providers serving survivors of human trafficking. Last year, Covenant House New Jersey experienced a 50 percent reduction in funding for our Human Trafficking Victim Services program supported by VOCA. While we have worked tirelessly to preserve every critical service, this level of instability jeopardizes continuity of care and places the recovery of vulnerable survivors at risk. In mid-January, the *Crime Victims Stabilization Act* passed the House by voice vote. Covenant House strongly supports this bipartisan bill introduced in the Senate by Senators Murkowski and Durbin and supported by many colleagues to ensure survivors are not further harmed by service disruptions.

Support Domestic TVPRA Reauthorization (H.R. 1144)

We support the *Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2025* introduced by Representative Chris Smith, which includes education and prevention provisions informed by Covenant House New Jersey's work. Specifically, this bill would support a survivors' employment and education program, including job training, case management, life-skills training, and other wrap-around social services. The bill would also authorize \$35 million each year for OVC's Housing Assistance Grants for Victims of Human Trafficking.

Prevention education — particularly in schools and community settings — and safe housing are essential complements to enforcement efforts.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to protecting America's most vulnerable children.