

Testimony by  
Holly Austin Smith  
Author, *Walking Prey*

To the Hearing Before the  
United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary  
Human Trafficking in the United States: Protecting the Victims  
February 24, 2015

Thank you, Chairman Grassley, Senator Leahy and other members of the Committee for holding this important hearing.

When I was fourteen years old, I was coerced into prostitution by a man I had met at a local shopping mall in New Jersey. This man exploited a young teen girl who had just graduated eighth grade middle school and was afraid of going into high school, so afraid that she agreed to run away from home. This man promised a glamorous new life; he told the girl she could travel across the country, meet famous people, and live in Los Angeles, California. What he delivered, however, was very different. He took the girl to Atlantic City, ordered her to prostitute, and intimidated her into cooperation. She was sold to the first buyer for \$200, a man who told the girl that she reminded him of his granddaughter.

When I was arrested by law enforcement for prostitution, I was made to feel like a criminal, like a juvenile delinquent. I felt stupid, ashamed, and ostracized by society. Days later, alone in my bedroom, I felt so abandoned, so forsaken by society, that I attempted suicide. I wish I could travel back in time to tell this young girl that, years later, advocates and legislators all across the country would be standing up for her, that they would demand better protection and services for kids like her.

Had there been a Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act or Stop Exploitation Through Trafficking Act in 1992, perhaps law enforcement would have immediately recognized that I was a victim, not a criminal. Perhaps they would have assigned a victim's advocate to accompany me through the process of cooperating with and providing testimony to detectives. Perhaps funds from the proposed Domestic Trafficking Victims' Fund could have enabled me to immediately enter effective aftercare treatment and remain there until I fully understood that what had happened to me was not my fault. Perhaps my healing process could have been easier, faster. And perhaps my family and I could have had an easier transition. Even though these protections weren't available to me, they can be made available to victims today. With effective and well-informed legislation and services, victims can heal, overcome, and achieve their greatest dreams and highest potential.

However, without effective services, it is very difficult to heal. This is why I encourage legislators to include provisions that authorize resources for services for all victims of human trafficking and child exploitation – girls, boys, men, and women. Without effective services, victims may return to exploitative situations and youth may be returned to abusive situations from which they had originally run. While youth may escape juvenile detention, they may not escape continued abuse or sexual exploitation. This is particularly true in states implementing safe harbor protections where law

enforcement cannot adequately respond without well-resourced service providers trained to work with child victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

In order to create effective anti-trafficking bills, solutions, and services for victims, I encourage legislators and advocates to consult with many survivors having diverse experiences – no single experience can represent all situations of sex or labor trafficking. Male, female, and transgendered survivors; survivors who were children when exploited and those who were adults; and survivors who were U.S. citizens and foreign nationals when exploited – each survivor has a different experience, a different perspective, and a different insight into effective programs that can prevent exploitation, protect victims, and prosecute traffickers and other exploiters. This is why I support the Human Trafficking Survivors Empowerment Act, which would create a survivors-led U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking to review federal government policy and programs on human trafficking. It is so important that survivors play a role in finding the solutions to prevent and end sex and labor trafficking.

Many survivors, including myself, agree that policies on prevention should be one of our highest priorities, which is why it should also be a priority for policymakers. In my book, *Walking Prey: How America's Youth are Vulnerable to Sex Slavery*, I discuss many predisposing risk factors that can increase a child's vulnerability to a sex trafficker's tactics, as well as community risk factors that can increase the likelihood of crossing paths with a trafficker or other exploiter. With effective community programs, we can prevent human trafficking and child exploitation from happening in the first place. One predisposing factor I mention in *Walking Prey* is being a youth with minority status, including LGBTQ youth.

Nikolaos Al-Khadra is a male advocate from Chicago who identifies as a survivor of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Nik says he was forced into prostitution at the age of seventeen; he had been ordered to leave home after accepting his identity as a gay male. "I grew up with [a lot] of emotional and physical abuse," Nik states in a personal email. He describes a home life in which his father regularly attempted to "'beat the gay out'" of him. He writes: "I drove to the gay area of Chicago. I had parked my car, met some other kids who were hanging out on a street named Halsted. I had went back to my car to get something not paying attention and was snatched from my car."

Nik then describes a hellish experience of forced drug use and forced prostitution. He says: "I think with the obvious signs of just leaving home, my personal bags in the car and being oblivious to my surroundings [I was vulnerable]...These men are predators [who] prey on kids like myself who were either like me throw-away youth or runaway." After managing to escape, Nik says he then returned to "'Boystown'" and "networked" with others on the street. He says this ultimately led him to illegal escort agencies through which he was exploited for sex in order to survive.

Nik writes: "There really needs to be more programs for LGBTQ youth who become homeless over parents attitudes [toward their] child's sexuality. I think being beat down mentally all throughout my childhood was why I stayed years in the sex trade."

If Nik was in the room, he would tell you that the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYPTA) is a necessary step toward preventing sex trafficking and protecting runaway and homeless youth. And I would agree. Many youth in America face homelessness for various reasons, including running away or leaving home to escape abuse or neglect. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) estimates that, on an annual basis, approximately 380,000 youth under the age of eighteen "experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week."<sup>i</sup> The NAEH further estimates that about 50,000 youth in America "sleep on the street for six months or more."<sup>ii</sup>

Included among homeless youth are LGBTQ youth who may run away to escape discrimination within their homes or communities. The NAEH explains that “[m]ultiple research studies indicate that a conservative estimate finds 1 in 5 homeless youth self-identify as...LGBTQ.” A 2001 University of Pennsylvania study reports a “place holder” number of 3,000 regarding transgender youth living on the streets of America...; however, the authors say they believe the actual number to be “much higher.”<sup>iii</sup>

There are many advocates like Nik and myself who experienced some form of human trafficking or child exploitation. In the Washington DC area alone, we have survivors like Evelyn Chumbow, Barbara Amaya, Tina Frundt, Withelma “T” Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, and Tanya Street, all of whom are authors, founders of organizations, or college students. Evelyn, for example, is a survivor of domestic servitude as a minor; she is now attending the University of Maryland studying Homeland Security. We are all eager to share our thoughts and perspectives in order to transform our negative experiences into positive change.

Thank you again for holding this hearing and for inviting a survivor to share testimony. I hope the survivor community, advocates, and policymakers can continue to work together to combat human trafficking and child exploitation and to stand up for victims across the country.

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<sup>i</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Youth,” [www.endhomelessness.org/pages/youth](http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/youth) (accessed October 26, 2013)

<sup>ii</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, “A National Approach to Meeting the Needs of LGBTQ Homeless Youth,” Explainer, Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research, April 2009 <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/NationalApproach.pdf> (accessed October 26, 2013)

<sup>iii</sup> Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico*, University of Pennsylvania, PA, September 19, 2001 (revised February 20, 2002), 30, [http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/restes/commercial sexual exploitation\\_Files/Exec\\_Sum\\_020220.pdf](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/restes/commercial%20sexual%20exploitation_Files/Exec_Sum_020220.pdf) (accessed July 29, 2013).