

March 20, 2015

Response to Questions from Senator Al Franken
For the Hearing before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary
“Human Trafficking in the United States: Protecting the Victims”

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Question 1

As the hearing made clear, prevention must be part of our approach to address human trafficking. One aspect of prevention is housing. The shortage of safe shelter steers at-risk youth into trafficking. Covenant House’s 2013 survey found that nearly half of youth involved in commercial sexual activity reported exchanging sexual acts for shelter or a place to sleep. Any prevention strategy must address this lack of safe shelter.

In the Twin Cities, there are an estimated 400 to 450 homeless youth on any given night, but only around 100 shelter beds. This is a particular problem in the winter, when shelters do not have enough capacity to handle the needs of homeless youth during severe cold weather.

The President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2016 proposes increasing funding for runaway and homeless youth programs from \$114 million to \$123 million. How would such an increase in appropriations address the shortage of safe shelter and help local service providers like Covenant House prevent homeless youth from becoming trafficking victims?

As this question acknowledges, there is a nationwide shortage of shelter beds for runaway and homeless youth. In New York City alone, there are thousands of unaccompanied homeless youth between the ages of 16-20 and fewer than six hundred shelter beds for them. As the Covenant House/Fordham University 2013 study demonstrated, when a young person is denied a bed in a youth shelter, often there will be a pimp or other trafficker waiting to step in. Too many young people have sat in my office and explained how they were at one point forced to make the choice between sleeping on the streets of New York City or the subway or going with a friendly stranger who offered a place to stay and pretend affection and safety before enslaving them and forcing them into prostitution. Although I work in New York City, I know from my work with colleagues from Covenant Houses across the Americas and from the National Network for Youth that this happens every day, in every city across our country.

I have also heard many young people explain how a lack of job experience and education have both led them into trafficking and made it difficult for them to break free from it. For example, one young woman explained how the only place that would hire her when she was 17 and living on the street with no high school diploma was a strip club, whose operators actually preferred that she had little education and no address. Eventually one of the clients of the strip club pulled

a gun on her and forced her into prostitution. Trafficking survivors have explained how they fear that no real employer will ever hire them because they believe that sex work is their only experience and have nothing to put on a resume. They then say that if they cannot find a real job soon, they feel they may have no choice but to go back to their trafficker.

We are grateful for the President's request and we hope that Appropriators will see fit to increase the RHYA even beyond that request to the authorized amount of \$140 million. The increased funding would allow for additional RHY beds, thereby allowing youth shelters across the country to take steps to reduce the number of youth who are turned away without beds. However, this funding would cover far more than beds by including wrap-around, trauma-informed services, including educational and vocational training, which is a critical weapon in the fight against human trafficking.

Question 2

LGBTQ youth represent a disproportionate share of the homeless youth population. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has estimated that, while only 3 to 5 percent of youth identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, LGBTQ youth represent 20 to 40 percent of all homeless youth. Based on your testimony, they also seem to represent a disproportionate share of trafficking victims.

How can we better address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth as we work to prevent trafficking and provide services for trafficking victims?

At Covenant House, we see firsthand throughout our work in 27 cities that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population. Sadly, young people are still being kicked out of their homes for simply being themselves, as Kevin Ryan and Tina Kelley chronicled in their book *Almost Home* (Turner 2012). As the Covenant House New York/Fordham University study demonstrated, homelessness increases one's risk for trafficking, and LGBTQ youth are at especially high risk, especially gay males and transgender youth. Many of the transgender youth we work with explain how no one will hire them for anything but sex work. The sex work then often leads to trafficking when an abusive client turns on them and forces them to sell their bodies against their wills.

LGBTQ homeless youth need many of the same things that all homeless youth need: food, shelter, medical and mental health care, legal assistance and educational and vocational training, all grounded in trauma-informed care and principles of positive youth development. They also need caring adults in their lives who accept them unconditionally, and let them know that the families who kicked them out were misguided and that they should be proud of who they are. This is exactly what RHY shelters provide, but unfortunately they are drastically underfunded and, throughout the US, youth are being turned away due to lack of beds. When a young person shows up at one of our doorsteps, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and takes

the courageous step of seeking help only to find that there are no beds, we must respond with shelter and protection.

Additionally it is extremely important that we make sure that transgender and gender non-conforming youth have access to employment. Like all of our youth, they need education and job skills training. However employers must also be willing to hire them. Employment discrimination against this population is rampant, and when young people cannot find legitimate employment, pimps and predators are often waiting in prey. We cannot allow this discrimination to continue, and we must engage in efforts to encourage employers to hire transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

Covenant House International continues to work closely with the National Network for Youth and the True Colors Fund to bring national attention to the plight of these youth and to increase federal resources directed at improving their access to safe, appropriate, and trauma-informed care.