

Pennsylvania Senate

Judiciary Committee

Public Hearing on Senate Bill 851:  
Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children

September 29, 2015

Testimony submitted by:

Debra Schilling Wolfe, MEd  
Executive Director  
Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research  
University of Pennsylvania

The Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research is a collaboration of the University of Pennsylvania's Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine and Nursing, and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia dedicated to improving the lives of victims of child abuse and neglect and those involved in the child welfare system through systemic reform. We seek to impact and improve the system at each touch point, from the reporting of allegations of child abuse through youth emancipating from foster care. Our work is guided by our faculty directors, nationally recognized experts in child welfare, representing each partner school on our multidisciplinary team. By utilizing the vast resources of the University of Pennsylvania, the Field Center strives to make research-informed and evidenced-based improvement, impacting policy and practice at the local, state and national levels.

I am offering this testimony in support of Senate Bill 851, Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children. This legislation offers us the opportunity to change the trajectory for children with a history of trauma, to provide them with help instead of punishment, and to refocus responsibility on the adults that exploit them over and over again.

Before discussing the merits of such legislation, it is important to provide a context for domestic sex trafficking of children. When sex trafficking of children is mentioned, the image that often comes to mind is the international sex trade of children, and the general public has difficulty equating that term with activity in the United States. In fact, the activity hasn't changed; only the perspective has. What previously was referred to as child prostitution is now referred to as sex trafficking, reframing the problem as one of victimization of children rather than looking at the child as the criminal. This is rarely a

choice for children. As one child abuse pediatrician put it, we should look at these young people not as child prostitutes but, rather, as prostituted children.<sup>1</sup>

In June of this year, the Field Center convened a plenary panel on *Child Welfare and Child Trafficking* at its national conference held at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. There are many promising practices around the country, and much more to learn. One of the nation's leading experts, Miriam Goodman of the Center for Court Innovation In New York, discussed how courts have established trauma-focused models to address sex trafficking. In New York, Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman has established eleven Human Trafficking Intervention Courts around the state. Following a research study to help identify the extent of sex trafficking among the youth in their shelters, Covenant House in New York opened a shelter exclusively for trafficking survivors. Withelma "T" Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, a former foster child who was sex trafficked from the ages of 10 to 17, talked about how she, and others like her, have always had others control their lives – caseworkers, attorneys, foster parents, judges and many others – so it was an easy transition to having her “exploiter,” or pimp, control her life. Sadly, she said that her relationship with her “exploiter” was the longest relationship with a significant adult she ever had. And, in contrast with foster care, her pimp never kicked her out, never called her caseworker to have her removed.

Selling sex isn't a life goal for these victims; it isn't a choice. It results from a variety of factors, ranging from human connection to survival. Research tells us that youth who are homeless, without a connection to a caring adult, and who lack education and employment skills are at high risk to be victimized. And, not surprisingly, many youth who are sex trafficked indeed have a history of sexual abuse and trauma. A study by Wilson and Windom in 2010 found that victims of sexual abuse were more than twice as likely as non-abused children to become involved in prostitution later in life.<sup>2</sup> The federal Children's Bureau reported in their July 2015 issue brief that between 70% and 90% of children known to the child welfare system that were sex trafficked had a history of sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup>

Research tells us that the majority of youth who are sex trafficked were previously known to the child welfare system. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that one out of six runaways are likely to become victims of sex trafficking and, of those victimized, 68% were in the care of the child welfare or foster

---

<sup>1</sup> Sophia Grant, MD, Plenary Panel on *Child Welfare and Child Trafficking*, One Child, Many Hands: A Multidisciplinary Conference on Child Welfare, at University of Pennsylvania Law School, June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, H. and Widom, C. The role of youth problem behaviors in the path from child abuse and neglect to prostitution: a prospective examination. *J Res Adolesc* 2010;20(1):210-36.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/trafficking.pdf>

care system at the time they ran away.<sup>4</sup> A 2007 study conducted by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, mandated by the New York State Legislature, found over 2,000 sexually exploited children in New York City alone. Statewide, 85% had contact with the child welfare system, mostly through child abuse or neglect proceedings, with an alarming 75% having been in foster care at some point.

Predators seek out youth who are leaving the foster care system, either by running away or “aging out,” turning the age of majority so the government is no longer responsible for their care in most circumstances. Many young people leave their foster homes without a place to live, without employment, and without a significant caring adult to provide them guidance and support. Other targets are youth running away from biological parents who are mistreating them. They are all without the necessary resources to survive, and have nowhere to turn. And, to compound their risk, their judgment is questionable. Research tells us that the brain isn’t fully developed until age 26, a contributor to some of the poor and impulsive decision making of youth. Predators are ready, willing, and able to offer the basics in life: food, clothing and shelter. They may be the first adult in these children’s lives that tells them they love them. As one door closes, the door to sex trafficking opens. It may be the only one that offers them hope.

The children this legislation seeks to address are the very children we have failed. They have been abused, neglected, traumatized, and abandoned, by both their biological families and then once again by the system that was supposed to help them. We didn’t do our jobs. We are turning out child after child without the skills, connections, and resources to become successful, self-sufficient adults. We are producing children with little hope for their future.

Seminal research in child sex trafficking was conducted in 2001 by the University of Pennsylvania’s Dr. Richard Estes and Dr. Neil Weiner.<sup>5</sup> One of their primary recommendations was to target adult sexual exploiters of children for punishment, not children. Safe Harbor provides a last chance for us to make a difference, and to offer these young people a chance to become healthy, productive members of society. Let’s not turn our backs on them again.

---

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from

[http://www.missingkids.com/en\\_US/documents/Fact\\_Sheet\\_ChildWelfare.pdf](http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/documents/Fact_Sheet_ChildWelfare.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Estes, R. and Weiner, N. The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, University of Pennsylvania, 2001.