

Monday, November 13, 2017

Testimony: Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee

RE: Safe Harbor, Senate Bill 554

From: Arielle Curry, MSS Director of Anti- Trafficking -The Salvation Army Philadelphia  
New Day to Stop Trafficking Program

Good morning Senator Greenleaf and members of the judiciary committee. My name is Arielle Curry, and I am the Director of Anti -Trafficking for the Salvation Army of Philadelphia and the New Day to stop Trafficking Program. On behalf of The Salvation Army's New Day to Stop Trafficking program, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important subject matter, Child Sex Trafficking in Pennsylvania and, more specifically, on Senate Bill 554 - Safe Harbor. We are in support of Senate Bill 554 and its provisions to protect minor victims of sex trafficking from prosecution, training of law enforcement, creation of a child welfare response, and the creation of victim services.

I have been working in the anti-trafficking field for over 6 years, as a social worker and since that time I have worked directly with hundreds of women, men, girls, and boys, who have been victimized by the horrendous crime of sex trafficking. The Salvation Army's New Day to Stop Trafficking program has secured three Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crimes grants to address human trafficking. Two of these grants provide comprehensive victims services in two separate counties in the Commonwealth, and one in collaboration with the Philadelphia Police Department to develop a human trafficking task force that has a joint victim centered approach. The task force grant focuses on prosecution of traffickers, victim centered investigations, and robust victim services. In addition, The Salvation Army has a 24/7 Residential program for female victims of trafficking and an on the ground drop-in center providing crisis intervention and basic necessities to women in commercial sexual exploitation. I would like to share more information with you today on the victimology of minors who are victims of sex trafficking and how Senate Bill 554 will greatly impact the work of fighting sex trafficking of minors.

In opening, I would like to share with you a story of a young girl named Miranda<sup>1</sup> who I first met through the Juvenile Justice system as an adjudicated delinquent. Miranda was 13 when she was forced into human trafficking and forced to "service" multiple purchasers of sex every day. At the time I met Miranda, she was 15 years old and was being held in a juvenile detention center, and was told, that she was placed there to keep her safe. Miranda was taken to doctors' appointments in handcuffs, had limited time outside and very little interaction with others besides a monthly visit here and there. In working with Miranda she expressed a desire to be in

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

the community, in school; she reminisced about wearing her old clothes and seeing her friends. Miranda clearly expressed confusion and frustration of “being locked up.” Being in juvenile detention had reinforced the message that she was bad and the one to blame; these messages were counterintuitive to any healing Miranda actually needed in order to be safe upon her release. Trying to guide Miranda through her journey of healing and support her in understanding her victimization at times was challenging. After trust and rapport were built, I had to often remind her that the blame was not on her and that what was done to her was not okay. Over the many years of working with victims of human trafficking I have come to understand that most often these individuals do not identify as a victim early on. Victims of sex trafficking are often told very similar lies by their pimp or trafficker, 1.) That it is their fault and they are bad; 2) That it was their choice or decision; 3) Law enforcement will not believe them and that they too have committed a crime. Arresting or locking up a child victim of trafficking reinforces these messages to them.

I share this story to highlight the inherent damage and message that is portrayed to these victims of child sex trafficking, when the first point of treatment for them is the delinquency system, an environment that exerts power and control and sends a message of blame. When this message is sent, these children are less likely to feel safe and supported and more likely to have feelings of guilt, shame and wrongdoing. The way victims of child sex trafficking are cared for, talked to and supported has lasting effects that must not be taken lightly.

I'd like to start with the first point, that many minor victims of sex trafficking have suffered previous childhood sexual and physical abuse in the home. One study has revealed that 91% of women who were prostituted had unreported childhood sexual abuse in the home.<sup>2</sup> Often times, their first trafficker or pimp was an uncle, mother, or aunt. When a child faces this kind of abuse when they are in kindergarten or first grade there is no developmental mechanism for the child to understand what is physically happening to their body. They are unable to name the abuse for what it is. Instead the child begins to normalize the feelings of helplessness and terror, blame themselves, and feel ashamed that they cannot prevent it. Normalization of traumatic experiences over a prolonged period of time is the human way of survival<sup>3</sup>. This normalization is often called resiliency. However, when we see a 14 year old who has been preyed upon by a pimp, groomed to believe he is her savior and her family, and then turns her out through psychological control, threats of violence, and or actual violence, we aren't as sure how to respond to that 14 year old when he or she comes in contact with the child welfare system, law enforcement and/or victim service providers.

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<sup>2</sup> Silbert, Mimi H. (1984). Treatment of Prostitute Victims of Sexual Assault. Victims of Sexual Aggression. Van Nostrand Reinhold.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, S., Giardino AP, Giardino ER. (2010) Editors. Intimate Partner Violence, Domestic Violence, and Spousal Abuse: A Resource for Professionals Working With Children and Families. St. Louis, MO: GW Medical Publishing.

Why? Because the minor victims' form of resiliency has created a young person who is resistant to help due to mistrust and trauma. Even more confusing for service providers is the victim who declares his or her love for their pimp and states that they choose to be with him. However, we know under no circumstances can an individual under 18 make a choice to engage in commercial sex acts. Furthermore, this same child victim presents to the system as manipulative and defiant. If we are able to understand trauma, we can recognize all of the above victimology factors are methods of survival that have been lifesaving for these children. For instance, when we charge a child victim of sex trafficking as a criminal and place her in a juvenile detention center, we are sending the message that she has done something wrong, and that she needs to be punished. This is the same message her pimp has also told her. Safe Harbor will protect these children from the very mixed message I have shared above. We must establish an approach that is multidisciplinary, victim centered and engages victims, by asking "what has happened to them" versus "what did you do wrong?" the question is very different. The blame shifts, as it should.

The second point is that we have found that the services designed to help victims of sex trafficking must be trauma informed and trafficked informed. Safe Harbor will allow for the establishment of specialized services which can be tailored to meet victims' complex needs. We have recognized in our work with victims and survivors that the recovery process is about empowerment and giving power and choice back to survivors so they can own their sense of success. Providers need to begin to ask what can we do differently versus, asking these highly traumatized youth to fit into services that do not meet their needs. The Salvation Army's program is focused on meeting survivors where they are at, at any given point in their journey. We are focused on creating transformational relationships with survivors, building trust and rapport, and responding 24/7 when a victim is in crisis.

Dr. Sandra Bloom renowned researcher of trauma, has phrased recovery services. She states:

"The complex effects of interpersonal violence map out the tasks that must be completed if recovery is to occur. But no recovery process is likely to be simple or straightforward because human beings go through stages of change and find habits quite difficult to change. Overcoming the effects of violence are difficult in part because there are barriers inherent in the psychobiology of trauma that complicate the recovery process and because there are also significant personal, professional, and organizational barriers to recovery that must be addressed."<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, I would like to share that we must shift our focus from "rescuing" victims of sex trafficking as this creates a misperception in the process. It creates a vision that victims are going to "want" our help, and that they will run into our arms happily when we arrive at the scene.

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<sup>4</sup>Bloom, S., Giardino AP, Giardino ER. (2010) Editors. *Intimate Partner Violence, Domestic Violence, and Spousal Abuse: A Resource for Professionals Working With Children and Families*. St. Louis, MO: GW Medical Publishing.

However, human development teaches us that when childhood is interrupted by trauma and then compounded by the complex trauma of sexual exploitation, the process towards healing requires intentional service provision that is based in autonomy and choice. Victims of sex trafficking have been traumatized not just once, but multiple times over a prolonged period of time by multiple different perpetrators. Therefore, recovery aftercare services have to be willing to work long term and must be focused on intentional rapport building. Change does not come just because a child is taken out of their trafficking because I rescued you once off the streets one night after you were brutally beaten. Lasting change comes when a victim begins to reclaim his or her voice, reclaim the self-worth that has been stripped, violated, and ripped from his or her sense of self since early childhood abuse. Lasting change comes when services are focused on meeting victims where they are at in their stage of change and appropriately engaging each victim uniquely in a trauma informed way. In order to help survivors move through the stages of change, service providers

“Need to respond to [survivors] in different ways, depending on the stage of change each person is in at the time of their interaction. Trying to push someone toward action when they are still in the precontemplation stage of change will simply push them to leave the office and never return. At the same time, holding back or discouraging action when someone is ready to take action, may also be problematic. And since relapse can occur at any stage, it is important for the [service provider] to predict this possibility and help the [survivor to] prepare for moving on again, even if they must go backwards first.”<sup>5</sup>

Child victims of sex trafficking are victims and should be treated that way by the criminal justice process. Services for these children should be modeled on evidence-based, trauma-informed care, where children have a voice in their journey to recovery. Safe Harbor will help establish services and establish training of law enforcement and necessary professionals so that no more children have to be treated like Miranda who never really had a chance to work through her victimization as a child.

I would like to thank Senator Greenleaf, Senator Leach and all of the sponsors of Senate Bill 554 for your bold leadership of seeking to change the lives of minor sex trafficking victims. This bill is desperately needed to ensure children like Miranda and many others in our Commonwealth are treated as victims and supported appropriately. Senate Bill 554, as it stands, provides tools for the child welfare system to respond appropriately to victims of sex trafficking, protection for victims from prosecution, training of law enforcement, and the creation of specialized optional services tailored to meet victim’s needs for recovery. These are all critical components of a system that can meet survivors where they’re at in a trauma informed way.

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<sup>5</sup> Bloom, S., Giardino AP, Giardino ER. (2010) Editors. *Intimate Partner Violence, Domestic Violence, and Spousal Abuse: A Resource for Professionals Working With Children and Families*. St. Louis, MO: GW Medical Publishing.