

Good morning Senator Greenleaf and members of the committee. I am Rhonda Hendrickson, Vice President of Programs at the YWCA Greater Harrisburg. I am here to support the passage of Senate Bill No. 554.

The YWCA manages a large comprehensive anti-human trafficking collaborative that brings together 4 regional human trafficking response teams, 5 sexual assault centers, Pa. Immigration Resource Center, and Friends of Farmworkers. Through this collaborative, we collectively address and respond to trafficking across 12 counties along the Route 15 corridor in Pennsylvania. We provide crisis intervention and response, and a multitude of trauma-informed victim services including ongoing case management for victims. We provide outreach, awareness, and professional training programs across these 12 counties. The YWCA's PAATH15 project, along with our committed federal, state, and local law enforcement partners, has identified and provided services to almost 150 victims of human trafficking since the program's official inception in 2014.

While most of our clients are adult, domestic-born females, children have been identified as well. In our experience through PAATH15, these children have been street-hardened, manipulated, and coerced into a life of sexual exploitation. These are children, most often, who have been runaways or throwaways – children that no one appeared to miss. The traffickers manipulated these children with a false sense of love and romance that quickly evolved into violence and abuse.

Yet, when these children are recovered they still have this flicker of hope and resiliency remaining. I've seen it. I've experienced it. I've looked into the eyes of one young girl in particular – a runaway from foster care in another state. She was placed in a secure facility when she was recovered. I, and my team, were able to visit and provide victim services. She was a tough cookie and didn't want to talk at first. She did want a coloring book though. After all, she was still just a child. So, we brought her a coloring book, colored pencils, and McDonald's. Those simple childhood pleasures that we take for granted brought a glimmer to her eyes. Yes, it was that glimmer of hope and resiliency. It said, "I may be bent, but I am not broken."

What was uppermost on her mind, however, was one question. "Why am I in kid jail?" Every visit was the same. "Why am I in kid jail?" "If I didn't do anything wrong, why am I in jail?" Unfortunately, she was identified as a runaway and detained.

As my case managers worked with her over the following weeks, this child began to tell her story. She also talked about her future aspirations and her love of animals. Then she begged to stay here with us. Our hands were tied though. All we could do was keep visiting until she was sent back to the state and the system from which she ran away. Each day, we watched that glimmer start to fade, the hope and resiliency was fading. She was starting to break. We can do better than this.

This child was re-victimized each and every day she woke up in that facility, unable to leave or have control over her own decisions. This was not an environment where healing could begin and trust could be built for this child, whose history was already filled with betrayal. This was kid jail. We can do better.

These children need the protections offered under SB554. We desperately need a place of healing and recovery for these children – not a return to systems, places, and even people that have already failed them. These children need trauma-informed recovery services including specialized case managers who are experienced in the depth and breadth of trauma experienced by victims of trafficking. Their trauma is unique. It is premeditated, deliberate, and willful abuse against a child. That trauma is compounded day after day, with rape after rape. These children need the trauma-informed services that are mandated under Senate Bill 851, and they need a safe, healing place to begin their recovery, not an institution or a facility.

In September 2015, the Honorable Jack Whelan testified on behalf of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association opposing SB554. He stated “the leverage that the juvenile justice system provides is crucial to the healing process, and we cannot just remove it. It is needed to keep the girls and boys in programming and away from their pimp or other bad influences. Without it, there will be no single existing entity or system to help these girls and boys.”¹

Let me say in addressing this comment, the YWCA stands behind our judicial system, our district attorneys, and our law enforcement. We sincerely believe they collectively want to see these children have positive outcomes and are committed to providing those opportunities. However, we have different perspectives on how to accomplish that. Court ordered programs will not deter a child from running again, as assuredly as placing a child in foster care will not. These children need to be surrounded by caring adults who understand and can respond to their trauma. They need an influx of protective factors built into their lives.

So often, child victims of commercial sexual exploitation are vulnerable because they lack protective factors and social capital in their lives. The YWCA is positioned to provide a comprehensive response including a new mentoring program specifically for victims of trafficking and at-risk youth that will infuse these protective factors. Further, in Dauphin County, we have a human trafficking response protocol that identifies the parties to be contacted upon recovery of a victim. The YWCA, as the human trafficking victim service provider, is part of that protocol and responds within 30 minutes, or we are already at the police station waiting for the recovery. Our agency, and others like us, are the alternative the PDAA is looking for. In addition, rape crisis centers are positioned to respond to all 67 counties in Pennsylvania and provide response to these victims. We are experts in human trafficking and sexual violence victimization. We are the alternative, and together, we can do better.

We need SB554 to become a reality. We need what this bill provides - safe houses for children to receive the services they need, a comprehensive victim-centered response, and prohibitions against arresting and charging victims. Senators, you are in a position to help us all do better for these young victims. I urge you to pass Senate Bill No. 554.

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.pdaa.org/testimony-of-the-honorable-jack-whelan-district-attorney-delaware-county-before-the-senate-judiciary-committee-regarding-senate-bill-851/>