

Pennsylvania Senate

Judiciary Committee

Public Hearing on Senate Bill 554:

Safe Harbor in Human Trafficking

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Testimony submitted by:

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Dear Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Senate Bill 554. My name is Hugh Organ, and I am Associate Executive Director for Covenant House Pennsylvania. Covenant House is the largest non-profit shelter provider for runaway, homeless and trafficked youth in Philadelphia region. For the last 18 years I have worked with runaway, homeless and trafficked youth at CHPA. We currently have the privilege of leading the Philadelphia Anti Trafficking Coalition. I am here today on behalf of CHPA and PATC to support SB554.

Homeless youth are incredibly vulnerable to traffickers. As mentioned earlier we released a study with the University of Pennsylvania that found that 19% - just under 1 in 5 – of our young people were victims of trafficking before they came to us. We estimate we will serve 700 youth this year which means as many of 140 of these kids will be victims of human trafficking. At Covenant House we work to identify human trafficking out on the street through our Street Outreach Program. We provide trafficking survivors with safe shelter and the intensive services they need to recover not only from their physical injuries, but also their psychological trauma at our 76 bed Emergency Shelter. We also teach and train all over the state on how to identify human trafficking and how to work with human trafficking victims. We are also fortunate to have strong partnerships with the FBI, the Attorney General's Office, and local law enforcement in this work.

Currently in Pennsylvania there is a law that is illogical, unjust and it hurts the very kids it should be protecting. I speak of the practice of arresting, detaining and charging child sex trafficking victims with prostitution. We fool ourselves by saying it's for their own protection. The idea that a victim of human trafficking would be safe in a jail or detention center is obscene. We want to protect all kids from the evils and complications of adult life. They can't smoke. They can't drink. But according to the law in Pa they can freely choose to sell their bodies to adults for money. Think about this, State law in the most advanced country in the world treats children as if they are mentally and emotionally mature enough to sell themselves for the sexual gratification of adults. We should judge a society on how it treats the most vulnerable. But in PA we arrest and charge child sex trafficking victims as prostitutes.

To put it another way: if an adult has sex with a child they are a sex offender and the child is given vital support, but if that child was first made to have sex with that adult by a trafficker that child could be sent to jail.

I would like to tell you a about a young lady I met at Covenant House.

The night before Holy Friday, at almost midnight, Philadelphia police dropped a 17-year-old girl off at our shelter. This young woman, who was from down South, had been visiting family in the area when they had an argument and she left to visit an acquaintance. But it turned out that the acquaintance and his friends were human traffickers. They forcibly injected her with heroin so she couldn't escape and sold her for sex. She spent the next week enduring serial rape, over and over again.

She finally managed to get hold of a phone and called her grandmother, crying and pleading for help. Her grandmother searched the phone number on the Internet and found an advertisement on the largest commercial online sex website offering her granddaughter for sale, with pictures and pricing. The grandmother called Philadelphia police, who raided the house and brought her to us.

What do you think she needed?

We could – and did - immediately attend to her physical health. We accompanied her to the Special Victims Unit, and our Clinic team from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia provided critical care. She had serious physical trauma, of course. But trafficking survivors also have far deeper emotional trauma. That kind of complex trauma can take years of intensive services to recover from.

That psychological trauma is caused by one core element: the loss of control.

When preyed on by traffickers and compelled, ordinarily by force, fraud, or coercion, to engage in sex, victims of trafficking lose control. They can't decide where they go or what they do. And they no longer have control over their own bodies. They do not have free will, and that lack of control is psychologically devastating. Recovering from the lack of control – restoring control, and re-taking control, is a therapeutic process that can take years.

So what's the last thing we should do to a trafficking survivor? Control them. Not let them decide where to go, or what to do, just like their trafficker. In short, the last thing we should do is lock them up. Sending them to jail – no matter how important and well-intentioned our motives – hurts these kids even more than they've already been hurt. It's wrong.

We support SB554. On behalf of the young people we serve, we thank the Senate for unanimously passing the bill and strongly urge the House Judiciary Committee to move the bill forward for a vote.