

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing on “Human Trafficking in the United States: Protecting the Victims”  
February 24, 2015**

Earlier this month, every woman currently serving in the Senate wrote to Senator Grassley and me requesting a hearing on this important subject. They reminded us that “[s]ex trafficking leaves victims permanently scarred by their exploitation.” And they urged us to act because “there is widespread recognition that the federal government needs to do more to combat sex trafficking.” I could not agree with them more. It is hard to think of a more despicable crime than the buying and selling of other human beings. Yet we know that it is happening right here in America, every day. Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of our children are sold for sex. It is happening here in Washington and it is happening in towns across the country. That should keep all of us awake at night.

We must do all we can to hold traffickers responsible and to help survivors of trafficking rebuild their lives. But if we are serious about addressing this problem we must also do all we can to stop this devastating crime from happening in the first place.

As I listen to the stories of survivors, many of them begin with a homeless or runaway teen who is scared and desperate. Traffickers prey on that desperation because there are so few places for these kids to turn. If we want to prevent more of our youth from becoming targets for human trafficking, we need to offer that safe place. Right now, we are failing these vulnerable kids. There are far too few shelters in this country and those that exist are too often losing, not gaining beds due to budget cuts. We must do better.

The link between youth homelessness and trafficking is real, it is dangerous and it cannot be ignored, as we will hear from Jayne Bigelsen. She is the Director of Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives at Covenant House in New York City, which is the city’s largest youth homeless shelter.

A 2013 study conducted by her organization revealed that 1 in 4 homeless youth became a victim of sex trafficking or was forced to provide sex for survival needs, such as food or a place to sleep. Of these victims, about half reported that the number one reason they had been drawn into commercial sexual activity was because they did not have a safe place to sleep. The study also found that 50 percent of the homeless youth had been solicited for sex by an adult within 48 hours of leaving home. Let me say that again, half of the homeless youth were solicited for sex by an adult within the first two days of leaving home. These traffickers are ready to pounce the moment they see a vulnerable kid. As the Covenant House study put it: “Every time a shelter bed for a homeless youth is lost to budget cuts, pimps are able to operate with greater success.”

No serious effort to stop human trafficking here in the United States can be undertaken without addressing the problem of teen homelessness. A runaway or homeless teen should be able to turn to a shelter—not a trafficker—for a place to sleep, and they should be able to get the services they need to safely get back on their feet. It is clear we need to do more.

That is why I am working with Senators Collins, Ayotte, Booker and others to support funding for these critical shelters and the services they provide. Our bill, the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, reauthorizes and updates the federal grant programs established by the original Runaway and Homeless Youth Act enacted more than 40 years ago. The need for these resources has never been more urgent. The population of homeless teens has more than doubled since 2007. Just a few months ago, our bill earned the overwhelming support of this committee. Since the text of it has not changed, I expect it will maintain this support when I offer it as an amendment this Thursday at the Committee's executive business meeting.

I am glad to see so many on this Committee working to address this complex problem. I thank Senator Grassley for listing Senator Klobuchar's bill, the Stop Exploitation Through Trafficking Act. I specifically asked the Chairman to put this bill on the agenda because I think it's a smart approach that will help victims. The bill creates incentives for states to adopt safe harbor laws like the ones already in place in Minnesota and Vermont, to ensure that victims are treated as victims, and not as criminals.

In recent years, many of us have worked together to pass meaningful legislation to combat trafficking. In 2013, I offered the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) as an amendment to the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act which I led with Senator Crapo. The TVPRA was adopted by an overwhelming majority of Senators. President Obama signed into law these important reauthorizations almost two years ago. And last year, I was proud to work with Senator Mikulski who led the Appropriations Committee to secure historic levels of federal funding for victims of trafficking, an urgently needed increase. These were significant and bipartisan accomplishments we should be proud of, but as the witnesses testifying before us today can attest, there is more that we must do.

Today's hearing underscores the urgent problems we face and the need for serious solutions, not just symbolic gestures. The fight against human trafficking has always been bipartisan but the question before us is whether the laws we pass will go far enough to protect those vulnerable kids on America's streets and whether it will truly help the victims. I welcome both of the Senators who are joining us to provide their insight, and the witnesses whose testimony will underscore how urgent it is that we pass meaningful legislation to prevent human trafficking and help the victims who survive it.

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