

PROTECTING VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND ONLINE EXPLOITATION

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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PROTECTING VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND ONLINE EXPLOITATION

Thursday, February 27, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
SURVEILLANCE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Washington, DC

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:04 a.m., in Room 2141, Rayburn House Office Building, the Hon. Andy Biggs [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Biggs, Tiffany, Moore, Kiley, Lee, Knott, McBath, Goldman, Cohen, and Swalwell.

Also present: Representatives Jordan, Fry, and Raskin.

Mr. BIGGS. Good morning. The Subcommittee will come to order. Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess at any time.

We welcome everyone to today's hearing on protecting victims of human trafficking and online exploitation. I will recognize myself for an opening statement.

Oh, I am sorry. We're going to do the Pledge of Allegiance. I'll ask the gentleman from Alabama, Mr. Moore, to lead us in the pledge.

ALL. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. I'll now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I appreciate everyone being here today. We're here to continue an extremely important discussion on protecting the most vulnerable members of our population.

Through the 118th Congress, our Subcommittee held two victims-focused hearings. We passed two pieces of legislation out of the Committee, and one of them ended up being signed into law.

I look forward to continuing this work in the 119th Congress by spotlighting how to best protect victims of human trafficking and child exploitation and give a voice to these countless victims.

Human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, is a heinous crime that tragically continues to grow in America. While international

sex trafficking may be more widely known, domestic sex trafficking also persists in the United States.

Traffickers even use social media to lure innocent people, including children, to become victims.

In the United States, an adult or child can be trafficked and exploited at hotels, truck stops, their own homes, and online. Trafficking victims are exploited in cities, suburban and rural areas. It can happen anytime and anywhere.

Traffickers use fraud, force, and coercion to induce their victims to commit crimes. This can lead to arrest, conviction, and incarceration of trafficked victims without consideration of their victim status.

Thankfully, we as a country have and will continue to make significant progress to help victims and survivors move forward with their lives. We're also committed to protecting children and combating the growing issue of child sexual abuse material, CSAM.

Identifying children depicted in CSAM is crucial to stop their ongoing victimization and capture offenders producing it. More than 50,000 children—excuse me—in CSAM videos in the possession of law enforcement remain unidentified. It's tragic that so many children remain unknown, unfound, and unrescued.

Last year, the Committee worked with the former Members of Homeland Security investigations, the main investigative body within DHS and the prominent law enforcement agency combating human trafficking and child exploitation.

We also heard from current and former Internet Crimes Against Children, ICAC, Task Force officers coordinating thousands of Federal, State, and local enforcement agencies across the country combating CSAM.

We also had powerful testimony from Tim Tebow, sharing the mission of the Tim Tebow Foundation and more about Operation Renewed Hope.

Operation Renewed Hope is the first of its kind. It's joining Federal law enforcement agencies with nongovernment organizations to identify, locate, and rescue victims of child exploitation.

Thanks to these heroic efforts, over 300 victims were identified, and at least 14 were rescued.

I understand Operation Renewed Hope is ongoing, and I hope more victims continue to be rescued and provided with the care they need and deserve.

There is no question these criminals must be prosecuted. While there are many solutions to combat these issues, we must ensure prosecutors are doing their jobs to put these criminals behind bars.

I express my gratitude to the special agents of HSI and ICAC Task Force officers for their unwavering commitment to safeguarding children and liberating victims from the atrocities of these crimes.

I also thank NCMEC and the Tim Tebow Foundation. These groups are leading the charge to identify and rescue victims of human trafficking and CSAM, and for that, we thank you.

Sunshine is the best disinfectant, it has been said. It is the best way to rid the world of these predators who abuse and exploit victims. We will continue our work to deliver hope to those who need it most.

Again, I thank those witnesses who are here and the Members of the Committee who are here and will come. With that, I yield back and now recognize the Ranking Member, Ms. McBath, for her opening statement.

Ms. McBATH. Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and good morning to all our witnesses this morning. Thank you to each of you for joining us today for our first hearing of the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance in the 119th Congress.

I welcome all our Subcommittee Members, as the Chair said, that will also be arriving, and I truly hope that we can find common ground this Congress as we work to combat crime and make our communities safer.

Most Americans probably think that we've never met a victim of human trafficking or online exploitation, that these crimes happen everywhere else. The unfortunate reality is that more than 36 million reports of online child sexual exploitation were made in 2023, while reports of online enticement increased more than 300 percent in just two years.

Human trafficking, a multibillion-dollar industry that includes both sex trafficking and labor trafficking, has been reported in all 50 States.

Before I became a Member of Congress, believe it or not, I was a flight attendant, and I was trained to spot the signs of trafficking on board the airline—the planes.

We were taught that if we saw someone in distress, we would reach out and help that person find safety if we could.

This training continues today through the Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign, which educates people in key industries and the public to help identify victims of trafficking.

What happens after that victim is discovered, whether by a flight attendant, a doctor, a hotel manager, a friend, or a member of the community? What happens after that?

Almost 25 years ago, Congress recognized that to combat human trafficking effectively, a system was needed that could help victims escape, get the support that they needed, and if they were willing, aid law enforcement in prosecuting their trafficker.

With the help of trafficking advocates, Congress' solution was the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a bipartisan bill that invested in prevention, protection of victims, and prosecutions.

Today, the entire system is in jeopardy. The current administration's chaotic and reckless approach to governing has put lives on the line by freezing funding and stopping the very critical work done by organizations that help victims and help survivors.

These disruptions have already forced nonprofits to lay off employees and while some organizations have had their funding restored, they still worry about how this administration might continue to undermine their work.

If the President continues down this path and funding is cut for good, it will be trafficking victims and survivors who pay the price.

Without shelters, where will these victims and survivors go? Without lawyers or social workers, who will advocate for them to make sure that they get the services that they need?

Without assurances of safety, how will victims work with law enforcement in pursuing charges, charges that might prevent a trafficker from reaching new victims?

If this administration lets the system fail, victims will have nowhere to turn, and that is exactly what traffickers want. When victims feel like they have nowhere to go, traffickers can promise them safety, then turn on them to resume their exploitation.

Now, I'm sure that there may be some out there who still think that this issue doesn't affect them, but the reality is that human trafficking and online exploitation, both in the United States and abroad, it harms all Americans.

When the administration attempted to illegally dismantle USAID and froze State Department funding, U.S. antitrafficking efforts were stopped around the world—efforts that protect Americans and the United States' interests.

For example, USAID has been working to combat online operations in South Asia, known as scam farms, which use forced labor to scam Americans.

Democrats and Republicans have long been able to work together to combat human trafficking and online exploitation. At this moment—and I believe this is possible—we need our Republican colleagues to stand with us in calling on the administration to stop the chaos and stop the disruptions, join us in protecting these very vital programs and organizations and their funding so that we can truly protect the victims and survivors of these reprehensible crimes.

Now is not the time for us to cutoff funding for law enforcement and safety reforms and safety efforts. Funding is absolutely necessary to combat these egregious crimes, and I yield back.

Mr. BIGGS. Without objection, all the opening statements will be included in the record. I'm going to now introduce today's witnesses, and I appreciate you coming today.

Starting with Ms. Jean Bruggeman, Esq., Ms. Bruggeman is the Executive Director of Freedom Network USA, a collection of advocates and survivors that advocate for and provide services to trafficking survivors.

She previously served as a human trafficking fellow in the DOJ Office for Victims of Crime.

Also, Ms. Basham, Ms. Anne Basham, the Founder and Chair of the Interparliamentary Task Force on Human Trafficking. The Task Force is a consortium of members of Parliament and Congress, government leaders, and survivors from more than 25 countries who work to stop human trafficking.

Ms. Camille Cooper serves as Vice President of Anti-Human Trafficking & Child Exploitation at the Tim Tebow Foundation. She's worked for over 20 years on issues, including child protection, child exploitation, and child trafficking.

She previously served for 13 years as the Director of Government Affairs at the National Association to Protect Children, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Ms. Sheri Lopez is a survivor of human trafficking and the Founder of Pearl at the Mailbox, a nonprofit organization that

works to end child exploitation through prevention, education, and awareness.

Her nonprofit is named for the woman who noticed that she was being trafficked and helped Sheri get free from her traffickers.

We welcome our witnesses and thank them for appearing today. We'll begin by swearing you in. Would you each please rise and raise your right hand?

Do you each swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that the testimony you're about to give is true and correct to the best of your knowledge, information, and belief, so help you God.

The record will reflect there that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Thank you. Please be seated.

Please know that your written testimony will be entered into the record in its entirety. Accordingly, we ask that you summarize your testimony in five minutes.

Ms. Basham, we'll go to you first.

STATEMENT OF ANNE BASHAM

Ms. BASHAM. Thank you so much, Chair Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and the Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Anne Basham, as he mentioned, and while there are many important, relevant bills here in Congress right now, I am going to be focusing primarily on two—and that is the Trafficking Survivor Relief Act and the GRACIE Act.

Human trafficking is perhaps the worst human rights violation in the world, and yet, instead of receiving protection and justice, many trafficking victims are arrested and convicted of crimes they were forced to commit.

Survivors of human trafficking too often have their voices silenced by unjust felony convictions for crimes they committed as a direct result—as a direct result, I should restate—of their trafficking offenses.

Traffickers often force their victims to commit crimes, and the resulting criminal records prevent survivors from obtaining housing, employment, and other essential elements for life.

Currently, most States have legal mechanisms that allow survivors of trafficking to seek vacatur or expungements of their criminal record that are tied to their exploitation.

However, there is no equivalent legal framework at the Federal level.

The Trafficking Survivor Relief Act, or TSRA, as I'm going to refer to it, is sponsored by Representative Fry, Lieu, and Wagner, and it actually passed through the House Judiciary Committee last year.

It seeks to address this gap by providing a pathway for survivors to vacate convictions and expunge arrest records for certain crimes that were a direct result of their trafficking.

Additionally, the bill allows for the Office on Violence Against Women to allocate funding for civil legal services and establishes—and this is very important—an affirmative defense for victims so that they can avoid unjust criminalization at the outset.

In the appendix to my written testimony, which I would really encourage you to read, I have included survivor impact statements, including the story of Hollie Nadel, who built an incredible career and was acknowledged as a trafficking survivor by the court.

She recently lost everything due to a wrongful felony conviction.

What is most alarming is that for most of these adults who are convicted in their late teens or early 20s, this experience began actually when they were children.

Research shows that the average age at which children are targeted for both sex and labor trafficking is just 11–14 years old, and more than 60 percent of child trafficking victims are current or former foster youth.

The GRACIE Act, which is Generate Recordings of All CPS Interviews Everywhere, was just introduced last week by Senator Blackburn and Senator Ossoff, and it incentivizes States to mandate audio or video recordings for all Child Protective Services, or CPS, interviews.

It also provides necessary transparency and accountability to those who are on the front lines of protecting children.

So, I'm actually going to share with you the story that inspired the GRACIE Act. Abby, as I'm going to refer to her, was a young girl. She was caught in a nightmare that too many children face.

Her parents were divorced, and during a visit to her father's house, a quarrel escalated into physical violence—and this was a young child in elementary school.

Abby's father grabbed her neck, the incident was reported to a counselor, and the case was referred to CPS. The caseworker actually interviewed Abby at her mother's home, because school happened to be closed that day for snow. That's very typical.

The mother listened to the story from the next room and recorded the interview. The mother told the—or Abby told the investigator the same story she had told the counselor.

However, the case was curiously dismissed.

Months after the case closed, it was discovered that the official report distorted Abby's testimony, downplaying the assault as a mere grab to the arm, not the neck, an act which could have qualified as a felony under State law.

Abby's voice was silenced.

In the United States, 37.4 percent of children—that's more than one-third of all children—will be interviewed by CPS by the time they're 18, and without recordings, these children's testimonies can be easily misrepresented.

I actually have here a copy of the Congressional Record. I know that you all know what this looks like, but for everyone else, this is just one day on the House floor. This is everything that was spoken.

What if you, as Members of Congress, went to the House floor and you gave an important testimony, and it was never recorded?

What if there was only one witness in the hearing room, not a stenographer but just an observer, who recorded a personal analysis of your testimony?

Would you take this personal analysis as an accurate record of your testimony? Do you want the most important statements of your life to be at the mercy of a stranger with a pen?

The lack of transparency and accountability within child welfare systems is appalling. Police are required to wear body cameras in most States, and the Department of Justice has mandated interrogation recordings since Eric Holder.

Child victims are not afforded the same protections.

Thank you so much. With that, I urge each of you to cosponsor both of these bills, as well as the National Human Trafficking Database Act, the Crime Victims Fund Stabilization Act, the SHIELD Act, the Renewed Hope Act, and the TAKE IT DOWN Act.

Thank you so much, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Basham follows:]

**United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance**

Written Hearing Testimony

Anne Basham

CEO, Ascend Consulting

Founder & Chair, Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking

“Protecting Victims of the Human Trafficking and Online Exploitation”

Thursday, February 27, 2025

Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about protecting victims and survivors of human trafficking and online exploitation. My name is Anne Basham, and I am the Founder and Chair of the Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking, the first global consortium of legislators and lived experience experts, and CEO of Ascend Consulting, a human rights advocacy firm which represents several anti-trafficking and exploitation organizations and convenes the bi-annual Anti-Trafficking in Persons Policy Roundtable in the U.S. Senate. I also serve on the Board of Directors for the Parliamentary Intelligence Security Forum.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of legislative solutions to protect victims and survivors of human trafficking and online exploitation. While there are many important anti-trafficking and exploitation bills in Congress right now, I will be focusing primarily on two legislative solutions that have broad support and fill critical gaps: the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act and the GRACIE Act.

The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act

There are two types of justice: punitive justice and restorative justice. Many people associate justice with punitive justice and think of incarcerating perpetrators and traffickers, and while punitive justice is crucial, this alone will not bring justice to survivors. Restorative justice advances restoration of dignity for victims and survivors—including the freedom to pursue a career and a life of their choice, and not to be forever limited by the violence and exploitation visited on them by their trafficker.

Human trafficking is perhaps the worst human rights violation in the world, and yet instead of receiving protection and justice, many trafficking victims are arrested and convicted of crimes their traffickers forced them to commit. Adult survivors of human trafficking too often have their

voices silenced by unjust felony convictions for crimes they committed as a direct result of their trafficking offenses¹. Traffickers often force their victims to commit crimes and the resulting criminal records prevent survivors from obtaining housing, employment, and other elements that are essential.

Currently, most states have legal mechanisms that allow trafficking survivors to seek vacatur or expungement of criminal records tied to their exploitation. However, there is no equivalent legal framework at the federal level. The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA) which is sponsored by Rep. Fry, Rep. Lieu and Rep. Wagner and passed through the House Judiciary Committee last year seeks to address this gap by providing a pathway for survivors to vacate convictions and expunge arrest records for certain crimes that were a direct result of their trafficking. Additionally, the bill establishes an affirmative defense for victims, ensuring they can avoid unjust criminalization at the outset.

The need for this legislation is urgent. Many survivors continue to suffer the consequences of wrongful convictions, which prevent them from moving forward with their lives. I am grateful to lead the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act coalition for the past few years, and in Appendix A to this written testimony I have included survivor impact statements, including the story of Hollie Nadel, a trafficking survivor who, despite building an incredible career and being acknowledged as a trafficking survivor by the Court, recently lost everything due to a wrongful federal felony conviction. Her story is not unique—many survivors face similar obstacles that this legislation seeks to remedy. There is often an abuse to prison pipeline and child trafficking survivors are often forced into the adult criminal justice system because their traffickers coerce them into committing offenses like robbery, money laundering, and bank fraud. This phenomenon, known as “forced criminality,” can lead to survivors being misidentified as willing perpetrators².

The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA) provides:

- **A pathway to vacate convictions for crimes that survivors were forced to commit.** Survivors should not be permanently branded by the criminal records imposed on them by their traffickers.
- **Availability of funding for survivors’ civil legal services** through the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women. Good attorneys are expensive, and most survivors cannot afford the legal representation necessary to clear their records.
- **A pathway to restorative justice.** Vacatur secures survivors opportunities for employment, and employment provides more than just a paycheck: it builds self-respect,

¹ <https://sharedhope.org/2022/06/14/unjust-criminalization/>

² <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-Abuse-to-Prison-Pipeline-2024.pdf>

independence, new skills, and new connections with people of integrity and excellence. Survivors deserve the opportunity to define themselves by their futures, not by their past.

For both sex and labor trafficking survivors, their exploitation was uniquely tied to employment; they were the product sold by the trafficker to make money in a criminal business operation, so for survivors employment is more than a paycheck. Employment is a means of restoring dignity, building self-sufficiency, and recovering a new identity that is not defined by their past. Employment not only changes the circumstances for a survivor, but it often changes the most important opinion of all – how survivors see themselves. This is why it is essential for a survivor of trafficking to be able to have a career without being branded with a criminal record given to them by their trafficker. The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act helps make this possible.

The GRACIE Act

What is most alarming is that for many of these adults who are convicted in their late teens and early twenties, their trafficking experience began when they were children. Research shows that the average age at which children are targeted for both sex trafficking and labor trafficking is 11 to 14 years old.³ While the more than 200,000 unaccompanied migrant children missing from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service program⁴ has garnered due public attention, many people do not know that one of the main trafficking pipelines in the U.S. is our domestic foster care system. As the National Foster Youth Initiative has shown, more than 60% of child trafficking victims are current or former foster youth.⁵ The GRACIE Act (Generate Recordings of All CPS Interviews Everywhere), which was introduced just last week by Senator Blackburn and Senator Ossoff, is a Child Protective Services modernization bill that equips Child Protective Services (CPS) to interrupt the foster care-to-trafficking pipeline by incentivizing states to mandate audio or video recordings of all CPS interviews. It also provides necessary transparency and accountability to those who are on the frontlines of protecting children.

Let me share with you the story that inspired the GRACIE Act. “Abby,” as I will refer to her, was a young girl caught in a nightmare that too many children face. Her parents were divorced and during a visit to her father’s house a quarrel escalated into physical violence, and Abby’s father grabbed her neck. The incident was reported to a counselor, and the case was referred to CPS. The caseworker interviewed Abby at her mother’s home because school happened to be closed that day because of snow. The mother listened from the next room and recorded the interview. Abby told the investigator the same story. However, the case was curiously dismissed. Months after the case was closed it was discovered that the official report distorted Abby’s

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK430910/>

⁴ <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2024-08/OIG-24-46-Aug24.pdf>

⁵ <https://nfyl.org/mission/>

testimony, downplaying the assault as a mere grab to the arm—not the neck, an act which could have qualified as a felony under state law. Abby’s voice was silenced.

37.4% of children in the United States will be interviewed by CPS before age 18.⁶ Without recordings, children’s testimonies can be easily misrepresented, manipulated, or even disregarded. How many more even worse acts of child abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking have gone unaddressed because of inept or biased caseworkers, unreliable documentation, or simple human error?

Let me provide an analogy for you. I have here a copy of the Congressional Record from just one day on the House floor. This Record contains every word that was spoken on the House floor in a 24-hour span. What if you as Members of Congress went to the House floor and gave an important testimony, and it was never recorded? What if there was only one witness in the hearing room—not a stenographer, but an observer who recorded a personal analysis of your testimony? Would you take this personal analysis as an accurate record of your testimony? Do you want the most important statements of your life to be at the mercy of one stranger with a pen?

I encourage you to read the expert impact statement from a human trafficking prosecutor in Appendix B. Camila Zolfaghari was rarely able to use the scribbled or typed unreliable notes from a CPS interview when prosecuting cases. Recorded interviews not only help prosecutors, but they also decrease the number of times a survivor must recount their traumatic experiences.

CPS interview protocols are outdated and the lack of transparency and accountability within these child welfare systems is appalling. Police are required to wear body cameras in most states, and the Department of Justice has mandated interrogation recordings for about a decade. But child victims of neglect, violence, and abuse are not afforded the same basic and necessary protections—despite the fact that the National Children’s Advocacy Center and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the Department of Justice have long recommended electronic recordings of child interviews to ensure transparency, accuracy, and accountability.

If the GRACIE Act and the complementary state laws pass, it will be the biggest child welfare reform in our lifetime. I urge you to pass the GRACIE Act and ensure that basic CPS modernization standards protect the most vulnerable children from violence, exploitation, and human trafficking.

⁶ [https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5227926/#:~:text=We%20estimate%20that%2037.4%25%20of,%2FPacific%20Islanders%20\(10.2%25\)](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5227926/#:~:text=We%20estimate%20that%2037.4%25%20of,%2FPacific%20Islanders%20(10.2%25))

The National Human Trafficking Database Act: Strengthening Our Response to Human Trafficking

Finally, the National Trafficking Database Act, introduced by Representative Kiley, Representative Hageman and Representative Hank Johnson in the House and Senator Blackburn and Senator Klobuchar in the Senate, represents a historic step forward in the fight against human trafficking. Data allows legislators, government leaders, and others to identify survivors by documenting and accounting for each survivor whose story deserves to be heard.

This bill would establish a national human trafficking database housed at the Department of Justice, creating a much-needed mechanism to centralize and improve trafficking information about individuals. By incentivizing state law enforcement agencies to report data through the Office for Victims of Crime grant funding, this legislation strengthens collaboration between federal, state, and local partners—reducing silos and ensuring a more coordinated response to this crisis. This database would allow state and federal government to track patterns, identify hotspots, and allocate resources more effectively. It would also foster collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies, ensuring that data is not siloed but shared in a way that enhances our collective ability to respond to trafficking.

These legislative solutions address the biggest gaps in U.S. domestic efforts to protect human trafficking, and they ensure that survivors are heard and seen. I urge each of you to co-sponsor the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act and the GRACIE Act and to support other important anti-trafficking and exploitation bills such as the National Human Trafficking Database Act, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act, the Crime Victims Fund Stabilization Act, the SHIELD Act, the Renewed Hope Act and the Take It Down Act. The safety and future of our nation's children and all trafficking survivors depend on their passage.

APPENDIX A

February 27, 2025

Dear Chairman Biggs and Ranking Member McBath:

I write to you today as a Human Resources and Operations Specialist, a business owner, a certified Anti-Money Laundering Specialist, a lived experience expert on PTSD and trauma, a policy consultant on Anti-Trafficking legislation, a human rights advocate, an artist, a daughter, as sister, a friend, a leader, and truly so much more. But lastly, I want to highlight that I am a Survivor of Human Trafficking who was federally criminalized as a result of my trafficking victimization. I say it last because it is something that happened to me, but it does not define me. It is not my identity. Nothing will ever make what happened acceptable, but as a result I am a survivor through and through. I am the strongest version of myself that I have ever been, and I choose to get up every single day and fight with everything I have to make this world a better place. To make it that our children and our children's children grow up in a better world. To make it that other survivors won't have to go through what we went through.

I want to clarify some common misconceptions. There is no black and white survivor story. There are all types of trafficking in this world. I am grateful to say that I did not grow up in a broken home. I was not an at-risk youth. I was an honor student. I received a talent and academic scholarship to go to Ithaca College to pursue a career in Costume Design. I graduated Cum Laude with a BFA in Theatre Production Design and began a successful career in television, film, and theatre. My moral compass was always straight. If anything, I was a goody two shoes. The closest I ever came to a crime was one time accidentally walking out with a water bottle that I had opened since I was thirsty while shopping at CVS- as soon as I realized, I went back immediately, and paid for it. However, none of this matters because none of that stopped me like so many others from being vulnerable. In my early twenties, I was laid off from my job. It also coincided with heartbreak after a relationship ended. I was a perfectionist. I was so hard on myself. I felt like a failure. I was ashamed. I didn't want to ask for help. I went into a depression. And that is when I met my traffickers. I was a prime target for them. And they were patient. It was a long grooming process. A process whereby they learned my vulnerabilities in order to exploit them. They gained my trust, they built up my confidence- they helped me start working again in my chosen profession. Just when I felt that my life was getting better, they went to the next phase. The take down.

This turned into eight years of abuse - abuse that a judge called akin to torture - involved involuntary domestic servitude, labor trafficking, sex trafficking and finally, forced marriage. I was under constant threat and fear for my life and for the safety of my loved ones. I was made to live out of suitcases, and was isolated from those who could help me. I took actions under extreme duress to survive. I received no profit from the crimes of my traffickers, only suffering. And yet today, along with so many other survivors, I pay the price for my traffickers' crimes. Many survivors during their trafficking victimization may experience "forced criminality," in which traffickers coerce their victims into committing crimes to profit the traffickers. As a result, trafficking victims may face unjust prosecution and punishment for their traffickers' crimes.

I did not benefit from any of this. Every penny that I "earned" at the direction of my traffickers was passed directly to them. For years, I lived out of a suitcase and I was rendered completely dependent on the traffickers. I was tortured. Yet, I was prosecuted. I had to resign from a job that I had only stellar performance reviews from when my unjust conviction for bank fraud and money laundering was finalized. I have to work so much harder now to earn a living due to my unjust criminalization. This is

often what leads to survivors being revictimized. Despite this, I am continuing to rebuild my life in ways within my control to do so.

During this time since my sentencing in September of 2024, I have continued my work that I have been doing over the last 7 years within this sector. Some of these highlights include the following:

- I started my own Human Resources and Recruiting firm. I also use this expertise to mentor and coach survivors to help them gain better employment and tackle the hurdles that we have to face.
- As a Certified Anti-Money Laundering specialist, I work with financial institutions nationwide to educate on the realities of Human Trafficking and how they can identify trafficking through the financial footprint and properly escalate to the authorities.
- I provided survivor support to financial institutions for the Survivor Inclusion Initiative.
- I worked on and testified on The Debt Bondage Repair Act and the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act. I am continuing to educate on these two pieces of legislation.
- I have been a featured speaker at ACAMS AML Symposiums, NGA's Criminal Justice Policy Advisor's briefing on Human Trafficking, and The Virginia Attorney General's Annual Human Trafficking Summit, HHS
- I was awarded the Pembroke Fellowship at the Human Trafficking Legal Center to help with Survivor Leadership Programs
- I am Secretary for the Survivor Advisory Board and a policy consultant.

I am determined to use my lived experience from these horrific years to bring meaningful change and protect others from human traffickers, and if I can't stop it from happening before, then I can at least help to provide a solution. It is important that there is recourse in place for victims who have been unjustly prosecuted. I urge you to please help pass this legislation to provide a vehicle for expungement for victims of trafficking like myself and so many others. The passage of this federal bill would merely bring federal procedure into alignment with state procedure which already provides for this relief for state criminal convictions. This will provide salvation for myself and so many others. Without it, I don't know what the future holds. The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act will provide recourse to right this injustice that I and so many survivors face. It will help to restore faith in a system that is meant to protect, rather than punish us.

Sincerely,

Hollie Nadel

Lucy Bloom
Director of Impact Strategies
Altus Solutions, Inc.
February 24, 2025

Chairman Andy Biggs
464 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Lucy McBath
2246 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Andy Biggs and Ranking Member Lucy McBath,

The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act provides courts and defense with tools to recognize forced criminality in human trafficking cases and to relieve the survivor from criminal charges. As a survivor leader and an advocate who has stood in court rooms alongside survivors and sat at tables with judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors struggling to find legal remedy, I can tell you that THIS IS A BIG DEAL!

As survivors are charged for crimes they are forced to commit as part of being human trafficked, they are further harmed by the very system intended to protect them. And independence is out of reach as a criminal record now stands in the way of living-wage employment, housing, and educational opportunities. Not being identified as victims of a crime, they often return to their trafficker after serving time, not seeing any other option, and not having the options presented to them that they would have had they been identified and received victim services.

Seeing survivors charged for the crimes committed against them has been one of the most heartbreaking experiences in this work. Judges and Attorneys need these tools to support the freedom of survivors. Please do all that you can to support the TSRA!

Sincerely grateful for your service,

Lucy Bloom

Linda Smith (U.S. Congress 1994-98)
 Founder and President, Shared Hope International
 February 27, 2025
 House Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance



Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the matter of essential trafficking survivor relief for victims, like Emma.

Emma was lured by her trafficker at 16, after being abused by the adults responsible for her care. She fled to him for food and shelter, and he demanded sex. He grew violent and kept her from school. He hurt her so badly she was hospitalized. Terrified, she did what he demanded: taking pictures of his other victims and posting them online. She quietly taught the other victims how to protect themselves from violent buyers. Despite the evidence of her own victimization, she received a ten-year prison sentence for child sex trafficking and was added to the sex offender registry.

Tragically, Emma's story is like many others analyzed by Shared Hope International in the Victim Offender Intersectionality (VOI) report and training for stakeholders. There is a great injustice complicating the battle against trafficking in the United States referred to as victim-offender intersectionality, or VOI. Increasingly we are seeing trafficking victims charged, often alongside their own trafficker, with crimes related to their victimization—even sometimes with trafficking others. Injustice is inherent in this response; it is inconsistent with the actual dynamics of how trafficking occurs, the nature and extent of control exerted by sex traffickers, and the influence of trauma on sex trafficking survivors. While we work to end VOI criminalization and welcome the 45 state laws providing post-conviction relief, the many victims already convicted under federal offenses need the Trafficking Survivor's Relief Act ("TSRA") to rebuild their lives.

Since the 117th Congress, Shared Hope has worked in coalition with national partners, lived experience experts, and congressional offices to introduce and pass the TSRA. It is critical legislation that, when passed, will enable survivors of human trafficking to rebuild their lives free of the lasting stigma of a federal criminal record. Simultaneously, Shared Hope has engaged in post-conviction relief advocacy at the state level, achieving some form of vacatur or expungement law for survivors in 45 states including D.C., allowing survivors to clear criminal records and allowing them to fully engage in community roles previously closed to them as felons, like volunteering in their children's schools and coaching their children's sports teams. These laws have demonstrated profound benefits, including increased access to employment, stable housing, education, and financial independence—key factors in preventing re-victimization.

As states gain momentum in passing comprehensive post-conviction relief legislation, Congress must also act. The TSRA establishes a pathway for survivors to vacate non-violent criminal convictions that are a direct result of their trafficking experience, as well as an opportunity to raise an affirmative defense to avoid criminal liability. This provision is essential because it recognizes that survivors are often coerced or manipulated into committing crimes by their traffickers and should not be further victimized by the criminal justice system.

Having walked alongside, befriended, and employed survivors who were wrongfully criminalized, we know firsthand the insurmountable barriers and vulnerabilities created by criminal records stemming from trafficking victimization. Believing survivors cannot be supported and protected if they are being criminalized, Shared Hope staunchly supports the passage of the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act as a critical step towards true justice.

Shared Hope International is a nonprofit dedicated to preventing, restoring, and bringing justice to survivors of child and youth sex trafficking. Shared Hope has been working across the country around the globe for over 25 years to guide and support appropriate responses to protect survivors, hold offenders to account, and ultimately prevent the crime entirely.

Thank you for holding this vitally important hearing.

APPENDIX B

February 27, 2025

Dear Chairman Biggs and Ranking Member McBath,

My name is Camila Zolfaghari and I am the Vice President of Government Affairs for Street Grace and the former Chief Human Trafficking Prosecutor for the Georgia Attorney General. Street Grace is the single point of contact for survivors services in East Tennessee and Georgia working closely to support law enforcement on the frontlines.

Human Traffickers prey on the most vulnerable. Most minor trafficking victims have multiple interactions with CPS both before, during, and after their trafficking. **Research published using data from Street Grace's direct services has found that 65% of minor victims of trafficking have a history of placement in foster care, and the average number of out-of-home placements was 3.47 (Furlong & Hinnant, 2024).** Also, research has shown that **"approximately 1 out of 5 children in foster care have been paid by someone for sex."** Courtney et al. (2007). Only a very small portion of these cases result in an exploiter being prosecuted.

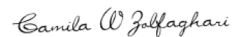
As a long time human trafficking prosecutor, I relied heavily on recorded law enforcement forensic interviews in my prosecutions, but rarely if ever was able to use the scribbled or typed unreliable notes from a CPS interview.

Recorded interviews will not only be useful for prosecutions, but also decrease the number of times a victim needs to recount their traumatic experiences. This is particularly important for trafficking survivors, as repeated interviews can be re-traumatizing.

Time after time, both prosecutors and service providers, see that the longer an individual experiences the trauma of trafficking, the longer the recovery process will take. Recorded interviews can capture more detailed information, leading to earlier identification of trafficking victims. This is crucial, as earlier intervention can significantly impact the recovery process and the victim's ability to participate in prosecutions.

As I write, names and faces of those that we failed to identify as trafficking victims through many interactions with CPS come to mind. I strongly believed recorded interviews will reduce trauma for survivors, help identify victims sooner, and improve the quality of interviews thereby increasing the prosecution of traffickers.

Sincerely,



Camila W Zolfaghari, JD, LLM
Vice President of Government Affairs
Streetgrace.org

Impact Statement – GRACIE Act & TSRA

February 27, 2025

Dear Chairman Biggs and Ranking Member McBath:

My name is Ashlie Bryant, and I am the CEO of 3Strands Global Foundation, an organization dedicated to preventing human trafficking and supporting survivors through education, employment, and reintegration programs. I write to express my strong support for the GRACIE Act and the Trafficking Survivor Relief Act, two critical bills that will protect vulnerable children and provide relief for trafficking survivors.

Human trafficking is a national crisis, and children in the foster care system are among the most vulnerable. Of the 390,000 children in foster care, 60% of child sex trafficking victims have a history of foster care involvement, and one in three foster youth who run away are approached by a trafficker within 48 hours. These numbers underscore the urgent need for reforms to prevent exploitation.

At 3Strands Global Foundation, we have seen firsthand how instability, multiple placements, and lack of trusted adults put system-involved youth at heightened risk. We operate a drop in center for at risk youth at the intersection of foster care and human trafficking in California, and our programs have educated 1.13 million students, teachers, and community members and provided employment and reintegration support to over 1,000 survivors.

The GRACIE Act, introduced by Senators Blackburn and Ossoff, would require recording CPS interviews with children and adults, ensuring critical documentation is available for investigations. In my 15 years of working alongside survivors, I have met many whose cries for help were lost in an overburdened system. Properly recorded interviews will:

- Improve victim identification through reliable documentation.
- Reduce retraumatization by limiting repeated interviews.
- Strengthen evidence collection to hold traffickers accountable.

We must ensure vulnerable children are not overlooked due to poor documentation or agency miscommunication.

Additionally, survivors of human trafficking often face lasting consequences due to criminal records tied to their exploitation. The Trafficking Survivor Relief Act allows survivors to clear non-violent convictions resulting from their trafficking, removing barriers to employment, housing, and education.

Through my work, I have met thousands of survivors who, despite escaping their traffickers, remain punished by records that should never define their futures. This bill will allow them to rebuild their lives with dignity and stability.

As a longtime advocate, I have seen how policy change can transform lives. The GRACIE Act will help protect children from trafficking, while the Trafficking Survivor Relief Act will provide justice for survivors. I urge Congress to take action now—so no more children fall through the cracks, and no more survivors remain burdened by a past that was never their choice.

Sincerely,

Ashlie Bryant
CEO, 3Strands Global Foundation

APPENDIX C

Impact Statement

Greetings and thank you for your consideration of the National Human Trafficking Database Act.

The National Human Trafficking Database Act was inspired by and modeled after our work at Engage Together, so it may be helpful to understand that history and its impact. Since 2014, Engage Together has worked with hundreds of communities and thousands of anti-trafficking efforts across all 50 states to strengthen community response to end and prevent human trafficking. What we know is this: While the problem of human trafficking is certainly global, the solutions are often local. Prevention, intervention, and care all happen locally; and developing effective, localized solutions begins with data.

The Engage Together project provides a comprehensive picture of a state's current response to and risk for human trafficking. This risk and response analysis provides a roadmap for change - for all stakeholders. Then based on that data-driven roadmap, Engage Together partners closely with community leaders (including task forces, universities, nonprofits, and more) to strengthen community-based response. This process of identifying current strengths, gaps, and needs at both local community and broader regional levels leads to many impact-full and transformational outcomes, including: expanded employment and educational opportunities for survivors, stronger collaborations of law enforcement and service providers, better screening resources for earlier identification and intervention, needed reforms implemented in state laws and local systems, states receiving federal funding to support their anti-trafficking efforts, enhanced prevention strategies, increased support for local programs, and so much more.

While data is only the beginning, it is the critical foundation on which all efforts must be built to succeed. It was the latest iteration of Engage Together's project in Tennessee, accomplished in close collaboration with our partners at the Belmont Data & AI Collaborative, in support of and alongside the TN Bureau of Investigation's Human Trafficking Task Force and Tennessee Counter Trafficking Alliance, that caught the attention of Senators Blackburn and Klobuchar and inspired the bill before you today. It is a bill that will strengthen our nation's work to end and prevent human trafficking and care well for all those impacted by it. We look forward to the impact that will flow from this bill should it pass, and we stand ready to serve when it does.

Sincerely,

Ashleigh S. Chapman, JD
 Founder/CEO, Engage Together®

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you, Ms. Basham. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Bruggeman for your five-minute statement.
Microphone, please.

STATEMENT OF JEAN BRUGGEMAN, ESQ.,

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Thank you. Chair Biggs, Ranking Member McBeth, and the Members of the Committee and staff, and my fellow witnesses, thank you for the opportunity to discuss human trafficking in the United States. I'm Jean Bruggeman, Executive Director of Freedom Network USA, and an attorney with 25 years of experience addressing human trafficking.

Freedom Network USA is the Nation's largest coalition of antitrafficking programs and a training and technical assistance expert. Our 98 members are NGOs and individuals. They are survivors, attorneys, researchers, teachers, doctors, and social service providers who work with over 6,000 trafficking survivors here in the United States every year.

I've provided detailed recommendations in my written statement and will summarize those briefly now.

Human trafficking is the result of policy choices. Industries like agriculture and domestic work, once dependent on enslaved labor, were left out of U.S. labor protections and are now rife with labor trafficking.

Our immigration laws were established to exclude Asians and Africans. The criminalization of sex work was rooted in opposition to mixed-race couples.

Enacting policies that protect all workers, value immigrants, and decriminalize sex work robs traffickers of their power.

Young people are vulnerable to trafficking due to their developing brains and legal and—excuse me—physical dependence. If you add in the poverty, insecure immigration status, sexual or physical abuse, or rejection by family or community, traffickers will swoop in.

Providing care and support to all young people, including education on consent and healthy relationships, protects them from a range of abuse and creates safe places to seek help.

The internet, social media, and cryptocurrencies are being used by traffickers but also by survivors and providers.

While we need safer online spaces, restricting access to information and shutting down sites with adult content only drives traffickers into hidden spaces, out of the reach of legal authorities. Age and identity restrictions collect data that hackers steal.

Far too many policies are used to block access to critical information and safety for queer communities.

We need to pursue policies that protect everyone, not just a few.

Both labor and sex trafficking survivors are left with criminal records as a result of their victimization. Our Survivor Reentry Project is currently supporting 137 survivors who have a total of 1,716 criminal charges.

We're connecting them with pro bono attorneys in the 47 States that have criminal record relief, but for those with Federal charges, there are no options.

Enacting the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act is critical, but we must avoid the pitfalls we've seen in so many State statutes. It

must include a broad range of criminal charges, reduced requirements, and meet the needs of real survivors.

Over 25 years, the TVPA has remained impressively bipartisan. Funding for services has steadily grown, but let's be honest, it's still not that much.

Fiscal year 2024 appropriations for the DOJ and HHS programs combined were only about \$120 million. They provide survivors with safe housing, medical and mental healthcare, legal services, and education.

These programs not only meet the very real needs of survivors, but they also send a critical message—we see you, you did not serve this abuse, and we will protect you.

Last month's OMB memo threatened to end all funding in less than 48 hours. The HHS grants were on hold for weeks. Programs funded by the State Department and USAID, both in the U.S. and abroad, have been canceled. Some programs have already enacted furloughs, halted hiring, or stopped accepting clients.

If funding is not reliable, programs will close. Survivors will have to choose between staying with traffickers and homelessness, between abuse and hunger. Funding cuts enable traffickers to abuse and exploit U.S. citizens and foreign nationals alike.

Traffickers target the vulnerabilities of their victims. To combat them, we can't use a one-size-fits-all approach. We must meet the specific needs of each person.

The Executive Orders on gender, DEI, and immigrants threaten this critical work. Guidance from the Federal Government to ignore gender identity and sexual orientation tells queer communities that they are not welcome in these programs.

Eliminating services for undocumented immigrants leaves them dependent on the traffickers who control their visas and their debts back home.

These orders are a blank check for traffickers and will lead to increased violence and abuse.

Most antitrafficking programs are embedded in community-based organizations, like refugee resettlement agencies, runaway and homeless youth shelters, and queer community centers.

They are a part of the fabric of our social safety net, and strengthening that net holds the key to not only supporting survivors, but preventing human trafficking in America.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Bruggeman follows:]



Freedom Network USA

Jean Bruggeman, Executive Director of Freedom Network USA
Statement to the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance
House Committee on the Judiciary
February 27, 2025 Hearing
Protecting Victims of Human Trafficking and Online Exploitation

About FNUSA

Freedom Network USA is the nation's largest coalition of survivors, advocates, and service providers working to end human trafficking in the US and is a leader in human trafficking training and technical assistance. FNUSA and our members have been engaged in policy advocacy for over 20 years, and were instrumental in the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, and in each subsequent reauthorization. Our 98 members represent the full range of survivors in the US: US citizens and immigrants in a range of legal statuses, young people and adults, survivors of both labor and sex trafficking, from the full spectrum of gender identities, sexual orientations, faith traditions, cultures, and ability levels. Our members include survivors themselves as well as civil attorneys, criminal attorneys, immigration attorneys, researchers, professors, and social service providers. FNUSA and our members are experts with decades of experience. Of our 58 organizational members, almost all have received federal funding. Together, we serve over 6,000 survivors per year across the US.

FNUSA was founded in 2001 by women's rights, immigrants' rights, and victims' rights advocates who were supporting survivors in some of the most complex cases in the 1990s: Thai garment workers trapped in a Los Angeles factory¹, Deaf Mexican immigrants forced to peddle trinkets on the subway in New York City², and migrant farmworkers subjected to extreme conditions in rural Florida³. These cases were all being investigated by federal law enforcement agencies, but the survivors had complex needs that made it difficult for the cases to move forward. The traffickers were preying on the vulnerabilities of these victims, using not only threats and violence but also coercion and manipulating the legal system. Traffickers are not just bad bosses, they take advantage of gaps in the social safety net and exploit unjust legal systems for their own gain. In these cases, they were isolating their victims based on their language, immigration status, and disabilities. Even in

¹ "Freeing Ourselves From Prison Sweatshops: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out." *The Asian American Education Project*, 2015, <https://asianamericanedu.org/freeing-ourselves-from-prison-sweatshops-thai-garment-workers-speak-out.pdf>

² Mirta Ojito, "U.S. Permits Deaf Mexicans, Forced to Peddle, to Remain," *the New York Times*, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/20/nyregion/us-permits-deaf-mexicans-forced-to-peddle-to-remain.html>

³ "Two crew leaders plead guilty to holding field workers as slaves," *Tampa Bay Times*, 1999, <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1999/05/27/two-crew-leaders-plead-guilty-to-holding-field-workers-as-slaves/>

Manhattan subway stations and within LA city limits, victims were isolated. These cases laid the groundwork for the anti-trafficking response in the US, and informed FNUSA's work in empowering service providers across the country to better support survivors.

Human Trafficking in the US

Structural Vulnerabilities to Trafficking

When the US developed and expanded labor protections in the 20th Century, certain industries were deliberately left out. Labor sectors that had been designed to be dependent on enslaved labor, like agriculture⁴ and domestic work⁵ were given few or no protections for workers. US immigration laws were established on a foundation of racism and xenophobia, restricting immigrants from Asia and Africa, while allowing White Europeans to continue migrating in huge numbers⁶. The federal criminalization of sex work was rooted in racist opposition to mixed-race couples. The Mann Act was used selectively in its early days, in large part to criminalize mixed-race couples.⁷ These biased systems have created tools of exploitation, which have made workers significantly more vulnerable to trafficking.⁸

Agricultural workers today still have few protections, and even less enforcement. Domestic work remains exempt from minimum wage and workplace safety requirements. Child labor protections are weak across all industries, and even weaker in agriculture and factory settings.⁹ Immigrant workers on legal visas are charged thousands of dollars by recruiters and are then financially bound to their employers. Workers are trapped with abusive employers because fleeing their employer voids their visa, leaving them undocumented and vulnerable to deportation. Despite following all the rules, workers are unable to seek safety when their employer exploits them and violates US trafficking and labor laws.¹⁰

Impacts on Youth

In addition to experiencing the impacts of problematic labor laws, youth are also vulnerable to trafficking in unique ways. Young people are not equipped to understand the long-term risks of their circumstances due to their still-developing brains. Young children

⁴ DeShawn L. Blanding, "The Historical Exploitation of Agricultural and Food Workers Needs to Stop," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, 2024, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/deshawn-blanding/the-historical-exploitation-of-agricultural-and-food-workers-needs-to-stop/>

⁵ Ariela Midgal, "The Legacies of Slavery and Jim Crow Live on With Exclusion of Home Health Care Workers from Fair Labor Laws," *ACLU*, 2015, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/legacies-slavery-and-jim-crow-live-exclusion-home-health-care-workers-fair-labor-laws>

⁶ Kevin Johnson, "Systemic Racism in the US Immigration Laws," *Indiana Law Journal*, Fall 2022, <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=11468&context=ilj>

⁷ Erin Blakemore, "The 'White Slavery' Law That Brought Down Jack Johnson is Still in Effect," *History.com*, 2018 <https://www.history.com/news/white-slave-mann-act-jack-johnson-pardon>

⁸ Freedom Network USA, "A Rights-Based Approach to Combatting Human Trafficking," 2015, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2018/07/A-Rights-Based-Approach.pdf>

⁹ Sherer and Mast, "Child labor laws are under attack in states across the country," *Economic Policy Institute*, 2023, <https://www.epi.org/publication/child-labor-laws-under-attack/>

¹⁰ Freedom Network USA, "Human Trafficking and H-2 Temporary Workers," 2018, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Temporary-Workers-H2-May2018.pdf>

are physically and psychologically dependent on others. Adolescence is dedicated to seeking an identity and community. These developmental stages put young people at risk of exploitation. If you add in poverty, insecure immigration status, sexual or physical abuse, or rejection by family or community due to your gender identity or sexual orientation, traffickers will swoop in to promise safety, understanding, and financial and emotional support. Unlike how popular movies portray trafficking, young people are most likely to be abused or trafficked by someone they already know.¹¹ As we have learned in the field of childhood sexual abuse, it is not stranger danger that we need to fear, but children's education still fails to address abuse prevention closer to home.

Traffickers understand these weaknesses and exploit them. They withhold pay from immigrants, knowing that they have debts in their home country that will bankrupt their families for generations to come. They sexually abuse workers and then threaten to tell their families or faith communities. They coerce workers into substance use and then manipulate their addiction to force them to work. They groom young people with promises of safety and affection, and then force them to engage in paid sex. Trafficking is a crime that is deeply linked to other forms of violence and structural inequalities. While all forms of trafficking happen in the US, specific communities are made more vulnerable to trafficking by policy choices that exclude them from protections.

Development of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act

Congress acted to fight back against traffickers by passing the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). The law was designed to work on multiple levels to disrupt trafficking, support survivors, and reduce vulnerabilities to prevent trafficking. To end trafficking in the US, we need this multi-faceted approach. The law's design and Congressional history demonstrate that these protections meet two goals: to protect survivors and to support law enforcement and prosecutions. This dual purpose addresses the challenges faced by law enforcement in the first trafficking cases: survivors who were not reliable witnesses because they were homeless, traumatized, or deported. Law enforcement and service providers agreed, survivors needed more support in order to cooperate with law enforcement, and law enforcement needed more cooperation to investigate and prosecute traffickers.

Congress acknowledged that extending these protections to all trafficking survivors in the US was critical to the criminal justice response to trafficking. A key component of the TVPA is immigration protections for survivors. The TVPA provides for immediate protection (Continued Presence) as well as a path to permanent residency through the T Visa, to ensure that survivors are not deported while attempting to assist law enforcement with an investigation or prosecution. Without these protections, traffickers who exploit immigrant workers would face no consequences and survivors suffer without access to services.

¹¹ Counter Trafficking Collective Data Brief, 2018, <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2616/files/2018-07/Counter-trafficking%20Data%20Brief%20081217.pdf>

The TVPA has continued to evolve and strengthen over the past 25 years with impressively bi-partisan, bi-cameral support. Funding for services has steadily grown, reaching just over \$120M between DOJ and HHS' victim services programs in FY24. In addition to the criminal sanctions with mandatory restitution, a civil private right of action has offered a path to justice for survivors. Prosecutions are rising, civil cases are denying traffickers the proceeds of their abuse, and federally funded programs are providing survivors with safe housing, medical and mental health care, legal services, and educational support. Survivors are now able to clear negative credit history that resulted from their trafficking, and in almost every state survivors can vacate at least some of the criminal records that resulted from their trafficking.

These programs not only meet the very real immediate and long-term needs of survivors, but they also send a critical message. They say: We see you. We know that you are a victim, not a criminal. This happened to you; you did not deserve this abuse. We believe you. We value you. We will protect you.

Online Exploitation and CSAM

The internet, social media, cryptocurrencies, and other technological advances are being used by traffickers, but also used by survivors and providers. The challenge, as always, is to identify ways to prevent harm while preserving avenues for protection.

Labor recruiters have moved from word of mouth to online advertising. They entice workers with promises and testimonials, reaching workers in remote areas and across a broad area, making it more difficult for workers to share information and sort the real offers from the scams. Once exploited workers start speaking up, recruiters change their names, websites, and online profiles, making it difficult for workers to track them. They also elude US restrictions by creating an unlimited number of corporate identities, when one is barred from federal contracts or as a visa sponsor, they just shift to the next. Online scam farms are proliferating across the globe, entrapping unsuspecting workers in abusive environments in a new form of forced criminality.

Sex traffickers use online spaces to find, groom, and exploit people. They have joined every game, app, and social media platform that has been created. Online spaces are used for a wide range of abuse- verbal abuse, threats, and extortion. Nonconsensual images are shared with individuals and groups. Survivors may not know where the images are located and struggle to get them removed. Cryptocurrencies allow traffickers to avoid tracking and financial oversight.

While these mechanisms are new, they target the same vulnerabilities as offline trafficking and child abuse. Therefore, the same prevention strategies are critical to protecting communities most vulnerable to abuse. A strong social safety net is the key. Young people and adults with access to affordable housing, high-quality childcare and education, comprehensive medical and mental health care, and a living wage are less susceptible to traffickers. When schools and communities are explicit about their acceptance of LGBTQIA community members, immigrants, and Black and Brown people, no

one is forced to leave their homes and schools in search of acceptance and a safe community.

While we long for online spaces that are free of abuse and exploitation, and need to hold tech companies accountable for failure to remove reported harmful content, restricting access to information and shutting down sites with adult content have not made the internet a safe place. Instead, it drives traffickers onto the dark web and hidden spaces that are out of the reach of US legal authorities. Age and identity restrictions risk the collection of user data and personally identifying information that can cause financial ruin for users, as hackers continue to outpace the development of safe data storage. And far too many policies are intended to block access to critical information and safety for LGBTQIA communities and organizations, in the name of protection. Making any community less safe online will also make them vulnerable to exploitation online, so we need to pursue policies that are protective for everyone, not just a few.

Criminal Record Relief for Survivors

Both labor and sex trafficking survivors are left with criminal records as a result of their victimization. These records trap survivors in a psychological trap. When labeled as a criminal, survivors with criminal records struggle to see themselves as victims. Records also impact their access to safe housing, better employment opportunities, higher education, scholarships, and professional licensing, and interfere with their parental rights.

47 states now have some access to criminal record relief for survivors (Alaska, Maine, and Iowa have no criminal record relief), but 2 of those states (South Dakota and Missouri) limit relief to minors.¹² The types of crimes, types of relief, and processes for clearing records vary dramatically by state, and even by county. There is no criminal record relief for any federal charges resulting from trafficking victimization.

Freedom Network USA's Survivor Reentry Project is the only national program that provides survivors with an analysis of their full criminal record to determine which items may be eligible for relief.¹³ FNUSA is currently supporting 137 survivors who have a total of 1716 charges in 268 cases/states, an average of 13 charges in 2 different states for each survivor. Survivors struggle with restrictive relief laws that cover only a limited type of criminal charges (typically prostitution-related offenses), requirements that are too difficult (including requiring survivors to attend a hearing, requiring concurrence from the prosecutor, requiring that all fines and fees be paid), and the disjointed US legal system that requires a different attorney for each state in which they have charges, and the high cost of legal representation.

¹² Freedom Network USA Survivor Reentry Project State Chart of Criminal Record Relief, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/advocacy/survivor-reentry-project/#:~:text=Criminal%20Record%20Relief%20Laws,VIEW%20STATES%20AS%20LIST>

¹³ Freedom Network USA Survivor Reentry Project, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/advocacy/survivor-reentry-project/>

Enacting the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act is critical, but we must avoid the pitfalls we have seen in so many state statutes. We must ensure that it includes a broad range of criminal charges, reduces requirements and barriers, and meets the needs of real survivors of human trafficking.

Funding Threats and Recent Executive Orders

Last month, we were told that all funding for housing programs, case management, health and mental health services, and legal representation for survivors would stop in less than 48 hours.¹⁴ These are reimbursement grants. Service providers not only had to consider how to cut back on what they could do going forward, but also what to do if they were not paid for the work that was already done. Some programs have already enacted furloughs. Many have halted hiring. Some have stopped accepting new clients, despite a growing need for services. As providers, we are trained to be transparent and honest with survivors. We don't make promises we can't keep. Survivors have to make tough choices to survive, and we don't help them if we give them false hope. If the federal government funding is not reliable, service providers will have to cut back or close. Survivors will have to choose between staying with traffickers and homelessness. Between abuse and hunger. Many will return to their traffickers until there is a more reliable path to safety. Funding cuts will enable traffickers to abuse and exploit US citizens and foreign nationals across the US.

Effective Services Require Targeted Efforts

Traffickers target the specific vulnerabilities of their victims. They don't use a one-size-fits-all approach. They target immigrants with threats of deportation, send their pay directly to the home country, impose outrageous fees for housing and transportation, they play on fears of harm from government agencies and law enforcement based on their experiences under autocratic regimes. They target LGBTQIA kids who are not accepted or are being abused due to their gender identity or sexual orientation, promising acceptance. They target immigrants who speak rare languages, isolating them with language barriers and lies. They target kids seeking their first jobs to help support themselves and their families, forcing them to work in unsafe conditions and threatening their families if they report to law enforcement. They target families in unstable housing promising a safe place to sleep to draw them in.

In order to fundamentally shift power away from traffickers, and stop the crime before it starts, we must engage in targeted prevention efforts that strengthen and empower people. And, we can't use a one-size-fits-all approach. We must adapt to meet the actual and specific needs of each community.

US Victim Services Programs Meet Unique Survivor Needs

Perhaps the largest child trafficking prevention program in the US is the Unaccompanied Alien Child or UAC program. When migrant children are found at the

¹⁴ FNUSA, "The State of Human Trafficking Services One Month into the Second Trump Administration," 2025, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/2025/02/20/the-state-of-human-trafficking-services-one-month-into-the-second-trump-administration/>

border or in the US without their parents, they are at extremely high risk of abuse and exploitation, not just human trafficking. Providing these young people with case managers and immigration attorneys to find them safe housing, ensure their access to education and connection to a school community, explain their rights, and help them to navigate the legal system, we are building a protective wall to keep the traffickers out. Disrupting this funding, even temporarily, opens the door to traffickers. These protections were included in the TVRA Reauthorization when Congress acknowledged these risks and refused to ignore these young people. We can't give them up now.

And while it is critical to protect the human trafficking grants from the DOJ Office for Victims of Crime and HHS Office on Trafficking in Persons, it is not enough. Service Grants are limited to a maximum of \$350K per year, for the largest grants. They start at less than \$150K per year. Most of the grantees run multiple programs to cobble together the resources they need. Some focus only on human trafficking, but many are community-based organizations addressing the range of challenges facing the community they serve. These programs are embedded in refugee resettlement agencies and runaway and homeless youth shelters. They are part of LGBTQIA community centers and civil legal aid offices. They are faith-based and secular, working within schools and health centers. They are a part of the fabric of our social safety net and strengthening that net holds the key to not only supporting survivors, but preventing human trafficking in America.

The OVC and OTIP-funded trafficking services programs provide critical primary and secondary prevention. Community education and outreach can effectively prevent trafficking in the first place by ensuring that people know their rights in the workplace, know where to find safe housing and shelters, and are connected to supportive communities. They also assist survivors to exit a trafficking situation and prevent their re-trafficking. Providers adjust their materials, language, phrasing, and services to meet the needs of the folks they serve. Providers supporting agricultural workers in rural communities will use different images, examples, and materials than those supporting young people in cities. Survivors must be able to see themselves, their situation, their fears, and their needs reflected in the outreach and education materials for them to be effective. Providers who target their work are not the outliers, they are the best practice. They are the only programs that work. Guidance from the federal government to ignore gender identity and sexual orientation tells LGBTQIA communities that they are not welcome in those programs, appropriate services are not available, and that the federal government is not committed to protecting them from abuse and exploitation. Eliminating programs for undocumented immigrants leaves them dependent on the traffickers who control their visas and debts back home. These orders are a blank check to traffickers and will lead to increased violence and abuse.

Recommendations

The TVPA provides for survivors to seek safety, assist law enforcement when they are ready, and prevent future exploitation. Our comprehensive victim services programs are critical to this approach, and the entire response will fail without them. Despite our continued improvements in the US response, weak labor laws, protections for vulnerable communities, and structural inequality prevent the US from fully addressing human

trafficking. I encourage members of Congress to seek out solutions that enhance protections for everyone, so that no one becomes vulnerable to trafficking in the US.

FNUSA recommends that the Congress work to address the following:

1. Protect the victim services funding in the TVPA by immediately reauthorizing the DOJ, HHS, USAID, and State grant programs.
2. Appropriate victim services funding at or above FY25 levels.
3. Fund and do not silence community-based outreach, education, and services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
4. Fund and protect comprehensive services for all survivors, regardless of their age, religion, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, abilities, or immigration status.
5. Pass a comprehensive Trafficking Survivors Relief Act that includes a broad range of criminal charges, without barriers for survivors.
6. Invest in primary prevention (eliminating poverty and discrimination, providing legal rights, labor rights education and sex-positive education) to combat trafficking.
7. Expand and do not roll back labor protections (including an increased minimum wage and Domestic Worker Bill of Rights).
8. Protect immigrants, including humanitarian visas (T and U Visas and VAWA self-petitions), Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, refugee resettlement, and safe asylum processing, to reduce the power of traffickers.
9. Protect UACs including funding for services, screening for trafficking at the border, and placement in the least restrictive setting.
10. Protect LGBTQIA+ communities from discrimination at work, school, and in the community.
11. Protect the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau so that it can continue to implement the Debt Bondage Relief Act.
12. Expand civil legal protections for trafficking survivors, including barring forced arbitration of human trafficking claims.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Lopez for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF SHERI LOPEZ

Ms. LOPEZ. Good morning, Chair Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and the Members of the Committee. I am honored to testify before you today on protecting victims of human trafficking and online exploitation.

My name is Sheri Lopez, and I am a human trafficking survivor and founder of the nonprofit Pearl at the Mailbox, named in honor of a brave woman who rescued me, from seven years of trafficking, at a mailbox. I share with you today a survivor's point of view.

I grew up in a stable, two-parent home. I had just turned 15 and was trying to find my place in the world. I was an insecure and shy teen which made me vulnerable to manipulation.

I share this to shatter the preconceived notion that most children trafficked come from broken homes, are troubled, or are runaways. I was none of these. The reality is that any child can be groomed and trafficked.

I met a boy in the drama club in high school, and he quickly introduced me to his father. Throughout three months, he groomed me and became my first trafficker. This began my seven years of being sex trafficked.

From the age of 15–18, I lived at home, and my parents had no idea what was happening to me, and I could not find the words to tell them that I was repeatedly being raped. This continued on the weekends and over the summer while I was in high school.

There are many times I tried to stop what was happening. However, every rape had been recorded and used as blackmail to force me into submission, along with other threatening actions that were messages to me to comply.

From the age of 18 until my rescue, I was flown across the United States and forced to do things I didn't want to do but did because of fear of the consequences.

Traveling on airplanes, nobody would've ever known I was a trafficking victim. Over time, my body operated on autopilot, while emotionally checked out to cope with the trauma.

During my seven years of being trafficked, I had four traffickers. One was a woman. See, a trafficked person has a shelf life. Once they are no longer useful to the trafficker, the trafficker is going to get rid of them, which could include being sold to another trafficker, such in my case, kicked out resulting in many homeless teens, or they're going to be killed.

Traffickers intentionally set out to destroy the will, heart, and soul of their victim and would not hesitate to take their life, too, if needed.

When a victim gives up on life and their will to live is destroyed, the brain goes into self-preservation mode to keep the heart beating, even if the victim would rather die to end the abuse.

Survival is in our DNA. Traffickers know this and use fear to gain and maintain control of their victim, beat down the will to live, and use the victim, however it best fits the agenda of the trafficker.

Human trafficker survivors are often the pawns of crimes masterminded by the traffickers and seen as throwaways who can take the blame. Many times, human traffickers are labeled as domestic violence victims and inadequately represented legally, and therefore, easy to convict, a box that can be checked and a person to put behind bars, while the trafficker can afford better legal representation and receive a lesser charge or accountability for their role in forcing another person to participate in what they orchestrated.

Let me share with you that it took over 25 years for me to grasp even what happened to me, to be able to put a name to it, and then it was anger that another person had the right to abuse another person in such fashion, that I finally had to speak up, and now you cannot keep me quiet.

I found my place in legislation. Last year with the help of Representative Gress, I was able to get the Arizona vacatur law updated and signed by the Governor, which gives human trafficking survivors charged with prostitution or minor criminal offenses the ability to meet with a judge and potentially get those charges set aside.

Also, I participated in a group with the help of Representative Bliss, Senator Bolick, and the guidance of Representative Wynn, which was Prop. 313, and it was created by the Arizona voters to put on the ballot and it was passed unanimously in the State.

What this does is, it allows any adult who traffics a child under 15, is convicted with the charge, will spend the rest of their natural life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Why is this important? Because a trafficked survivor has a life sentence themselves. I will never get away from what happened to me. The life I had before is now gone.

I respectfully ask that you support the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act. Doing so will give survivors hope that they can go forward and have a new life. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lopez follows:]

United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance
Written Hearing Testimony

Sheri Lopez

Founder and CEO of Pearl at the Mailbox
Human Trafficking Survivor

“Protecting Victims of Human Trafficking and Online Exploitation”
Thursday, February 27, 2025

Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and members of the Committee:

It is an immense honor to testify before you today on protecting victims of human trafficking and online exploitation. My name is Sheri Lopez, and I am a human trafficking survivor and the founder of the nonprofit Pearl at the Mailbox, named in honor of a brave woman named Pearl who paid attention to what was happening around her and helped me get free from the horrors of being trafficked.

I grew up in a two-parent professional home; my parents were busy and tired when they came home from work, as with most parents. I am the middle of three girls. I just turned 15 and was trying to find my place in my little world. I was an insecure and shy teen. I was heartbroken that at the start of high school, most of my friends I worked hard to make in middle school would attend another high school based on school boundary lines.

I was a well-behaved child. I share this to shatter the preconceived notion that all children trafficked come from broken homes, are troubled, or are runaways; I was none of these. Any child can be groomed and trafficked. In fact, the innocence of growing up in a stable household can unintentionally leave children more vulnerable to predators because they are trusting and less aware.

I got involved with the drama department in high school, and that is where I met “Carl” (not his real name). He befriended me, and we began what I thought was a real relationship.

I was quickly introduced to “Carl’s” father and invited to weekend parties, which, in the beginning were none threatening. Initially, I lied to my parents to attend these parties by telling them I was at a friend’s home that my parents knew well.

Over three months, “Carl” would ask questions about my home life, whether I felt my parents’ paid attention to me, and topics that were important to me. At the time, I did not know that all I shared with “Carl” in confidence was being shared with his father, who would attempt to alienate from my parents by encouraging me to see them problem and himself a good guy. He was successful in creating a wall between me and my parents and eroding truth between us.

In the beginning, the parties were uneventful, and I felt safe. However, that changed as three-month of perceived kindness and grooming. I was no longer able to decline the party invitations. I was now expected to attend the parties the entire weekend, in which I was drugged and repeatedly raped.

Once I realized I was being raped, I pushed back and did not want to attend the parties anymore. However, I was coerced to continue because I was told that my rapes were video recorded and they would be shown to my parents if I didn’t comply. They told me that my parents would lose their jobs, and my family would become homeless because of me.

To show me they were serious, my parent’s cars were egged, their car tires slashed, and “Carl” would climb over our fence, let my dog lose repeatedly, and gained access to my work schedule so that I could not tell them I had to work and could not attend the parties.

By the end of my freshman year in high school, I was being sold (trafficked) on the weekends and during the summer by Carl’s father, with my parents unaware because they believed I was at my friend’s house.

This began my 7-year journey of being sex trafficked; from the age of 15 to 18. I didn’t know then that this is the typical age targeted by traffickers, and my scenario was all too common. I lived at home while being trafficked, and no one knew. I wasn’t kidnapped, but my teen years were silently stolen. I was a child with a brain and body but was still developing who was living in a nightmare.

During the next 7 years I was trafficked by four traffickers, one whom was a woman, and eventually was rescued by a woman named Pearl whom I met at the mailbox at the last location I was held. By this point I could no longer move freely and had to earn this privilege from th trafficker to get the mail unattended.

As a victim of human trafficking, I never “walked the streets”; I was always sold behind closed doors, such as hotels and homes. I was dressed nicely, and my appearance was impeccable. This was done so as not to draw attention to myself and to fit in with the environment I would be in. I was also flown across the country many times, and no one ever suspected I was being trafficked. I dressed like a young business professional.

Upon rescue, it took me close to 25 years to process what happened to me: the abuse, the darkness I was subjected to, the loss of freedom I faced, why my parents never suspected anything, why I could not tell anyone what was happening, the beginning of what would be 12 operations to fix my damaged internal organs, and the reality that another human being preyed upon me for money. There were a lot of “why’s”. Why did this happen? Why did I not see I was being manipulated? Why did I not fight harder to get away? The self-blame that a trafficker instills in their victim is very difficult to reverse.

I got to the point where I was angry that a human being felt they had the right to sell another human being for money and profit; I had to speak up.

Grooming and human trafficking are horrific crimes that must be addressed, not just talked about. Innocent children and adults are being preyed upon every day in person and online.

I do not rely on statistics because, sadly, I would be considered a statistic, and I do not want to be seen that way.

I have chosen to share how I was groomed to hopefully prevent it from happening to another person. In 2024, I got involved in the Arizona legislative process to address gaps that I saw were not adequately protecting children and survivors.

With the assistance and guidance of Representative Matt Gress (Arizona), we successfully updated and made Arizona’s outdated vacatur law relevant. The bill was signed into law and went into effect in October 2024. The vacatur law allows human trafficking survivors who were charged with prostitution and other nonviolent charges in Arizona the ability to petition the jurisdiction where the charges occurred, meet with a judge, and hopefully get the charge(s) vacated or set aside so that the survivor can move forward in life without charges preventing them from getting housing and employment.

This is why I have been an active member of the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act coalition in the past Congress. I know how a person who is being trafficked can commit crimes to survive. Our bodies are designed for self-preservation, and when a trafficked person sees no way out of a situation and knows the extreme consequences they will face and that someone they love or care about can be hurt or killed if they do not do what they are told to do, it is an automatic response for survival. Most trafficking survivors were also children when their grooming started. I was over 18 when I escaped, but I was only 15 when it started.

I am thankful to Chairman Biggs and others here today for passing this legislation through the Judiciary Committee in the 118th Congress and for reintroducing it this year. The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA), led by Rep. Fry, Rep. Lieu, and Rep. Wagner accomplishes at the federal level what so many states like Arizona have accomplished at the state level – it provides vacatur and expungement of criminal records for survivors of trafficking to be able to reclaim their lives and not be branded for the rest of their life by the

worst thing that ever happened to them. Survivors like me have been unable to hold careers, pursue their dreams, and fully recover because of unjust federal convictions despite the fact they are simultaneously considered victims of trafficking. There is a significant gap with economic and societal impacts that can be fixed with the TSRA.

Additionally, the lack of prevention education in schools is not acceptable. With our modern epidemic of child trafficking and online exploitation through apps on the phones of most children, every school in America should have mandatory prevention education for students. We had the school-based DARE program in the 1980's to address the drug trafficking crisis. Predators go where the children are: school, sports, and online, yet most schools lack prevention education. Some of the objections I have heard to widespread prevention are:

- Myth: It should be considered “sex education.” Truth: It is grooming and predator education.
- Myth: It would scare the children. Truth: Being a victim of exploitation and trafficking is scarier than learning about it.
- Myth: Teachers have too much on their plates to teach anything else. Truth: This can be incorporated into the curriculum like any other school standard.
- Myth: The tablets/computer used in schools have adequate firewalls. Truth: Many children have been asked for inappropriate images via these devices. Traffickers are in criminal operation are always looking to adapt.

I have worked with many survivors of human trafficking, and here are some avenues that led to their trafficking:

- Inline games
- Dating apps
- A job, i.e., strip clubs, bars, or an employer at the mall
- Boyfriend, partner, spouse
- Neighbor
- Modeling

No one truly knows how many children and adults are being trafficked in America, let alone around the world. My focus is to prevent child grooming and exploitation in America through prevention education and awareness.

This is why I encourage you to support the *Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act* introduced by Rep. Buchana and Rep. Wasserman-Schultz which could create a grant program within the Office of Trafficking in Person at the Department of Health and

Human Services to provide training for students, teachers, and other school personnel on the warning signs of human trafficking. Education truly is the key to stopping human trafficking before it starts or in its earliest stages. Suppose parents, guardians, educators, lawmakers, and those who care about the well-being of America's children are willing to have the uncomfortable conversation about grooming and trafficking and are willing to accept that this is happening in America. We would have a better chance of preventing this lifelong trauma from happening to someone else.

Finally, I was part of a work-study team with Arizona Senator Shawna Bolick and Representative Selina Bliss in 2024 known as Prop 313. The Arizona voters overwhelmingly passed the bill which sentences adults who are charged with buying or selling a minor under the age of 15 to life in prison without parole.

However, the age range of 15 to 17 remains unprotected in Arizona, and many states. I continue to try and get laws in place to hold the buyers and sellers accountable, as they are for victims under 15. Sadly, I keep running into brick walls, as some legislators believe that there should be fewer people in prison. I think that any person who commits a sex crime against a child or a person who buys or sells a trafficked person should be sentenced to time behind bars.

Arizona's current law: Sex abuse of children under 15 is a class 2 felony. Sex abuse of children between 15-17 is a class 6 felony and often pled down to a misdemeanor.

I attempted to get the Arizona Sex Offender Registry updated this year. The goal was to have adults who were charged with a sex crime against a minor remain not only on the Arizona Sex Offender Registry for life but also to have lifetime supervised probation once released from prison.

My goals:

- Hold buyers accountable with mandatory prison time and the inability to plead to a misdemeanor.
- Provide criminal relief for human trafficking survivors who can prove they were trafficked at the time of their crime.
- Enhanced, real-time age verification on all online platforms, apps, and games.
- Determine ways to protect minors from AI

- Grooming prevention education required in all schools at a minimum of 1 hour twice a year.
- Updated sex offender registry that requires sex offenders to check in with their probation officer 4 times a year to track where they reside.

Thank you again, Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and members of the Committee for your time and attention. I am grateful for your focus on this issue and for protecting children. I look forward to answering your questions.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. The Chair recognizes now Ms. Cooper for your five minutes.

STATEMENT OF CAMILLE COOPER

Ms. COOPER. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Chair Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and honorable Members of the Committee, thank you for having me back to speak again. My name is Camille Cooper, and I'm Vice President of Anti-Human Trafficking & Child Exploitation at the Tim Tebow Foundation.

The Tim Tebow Foundation exists to bring faith, hope, and love to those needing a brighter day in their darkest hour of need. Our antihuman trafficking efforts span 52 countries around the globe.

You have a few great bills before you this Congress, the Strengthening Child Exploitation Enforcement Act, the Protect Our Children Act reauthorization, the SHIELD Act, the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act, and Representative Smith's reauthorization of TVPRA.

For today I'm going to focus most of my attention on the Renewed Hope Act, which addresses the need to identify and safeguard the 57,000 unknown children seen in crime scene photos that depict their rape and torture.

Chair Biggs and Representative Laura Lee, thank you for your leadership and your assistance with that bill.

Ten years ago, in a small town, a man started raping his two-year-old stepdaughter. For our purposes, I'm going to call her Jane Doe. He filmed that abuse and shared it online with other pedophiles.

The girl repeatedly disclosed her abuse, but she was not believed. For this little girl, the bogeyman was real, and he lived down the hall. For 10 years, Jane Doe suffered.

In 2020, the number of children in the U.S. like Jane Doe that had their abuse images in the possession of law enforcement, but had yet to be identified and safeguarded, was 11,000.

In 2022, the anecdotal information put that number at 20,000. In just two years, it had almost doubled.

When I got to TTF, we put the protection of those children as our number one priority, and we got to work. With the help of Timmy, Jon Rouse, Jim Cole, and the entire team at TTF, we hatched a plan—bring all the experts in the world together with the goal of determining how many unknown victims were in the global image database at INTERPOL and operationalize a plan to find them.

The result of that meeting led Homeland Security Investigations to create the first-ever Victim Identification Task Force in the United States and dubbed it Operation Renewed Hope.

In the summer of 2023 and the winter of 2024, this task force tentatively identified over 730 children, including Jane Doe. To date, 289 of those children have been confirmed safeguarded. Almost half were American children.

Operation Renewed Hope 3 is currently underway as we speak. Based on current data of actively traded series identified at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, we know that family members are the largest category of offender in actively traded series, and of those, fathers produce more child sexual abuse images than any other type of offender category.

According to law enforcement, children can be heard in these videos screaming for daddy to stop.

In an unidentified—in a study of unidentified victims of the INTERPOL database, they found that 84 percent of the images were of actual child sexual abuse; 47 percent contained extreme abuse, including rape, bondage, torture, defecation, and even bestiality; 4.3 percent of the images were infants.

Due to the nature of online distribution, international collaboration with INTERPOL is essential in identifying and safeguarding American children.

By way of example, the offender in Arizona rapes his child, films it, shares it with offenders in Spain or Germany. When those countries make an arrest and seize that offender's devices and analyze the images, they will find new victims, and those new victims' images go to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation Database.

Since its inception, 14,000 children, or almost half of the unidentified images in the ICSE database, have been American children, and this is why collaboration is so critical.

If half of the unidentified children in INTERPOL's database are likely American victims, that means that a team of seven at HSI Cybercrimes Center are tasked with finding tens of thousands of American victims.

That's why the Renewed Hope Act is critical. It will increase that full-time workforce from 7–200.

Despite the success of Operation Renewed Hope, we cannot leave these remaining 56,000 children to languish, they need intervention and they need it quickly.

When Jane Doe was protected, this is what she said.

When the police arrived at my house, I felt happy. I felt that something good will happen for me. God, I was thrilled, I wanted to smile because I knew something good will happen. It was magic.

Today the fate of 56,000 children is in your hands. Thank you for allowing me to speak.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Cooper follows:]

Testimony
Of
Camille Cooper
Vice President
of
Anti-Human Trafficking & Child Exploitation
Tim Tebow Foundation
before
the
US House of Representatives
House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government
Surveillance
“Protecting Victims of Human Trafficking and Online
Exploitation”
February 27, 2025

Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBeth, and honorable members of the committee, thank you for having me back to speak. My name is Camille Cooper, and I am the Vice President of Anti Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation at the Tim Tebow Foundation. I also have the honor of sitting on the Advisory Board for Rights4Girls, a non-profit dedicated to advocating for safety and justice for America's trafficked youth.

The Tim Tebow Foundation exists to bring Faith, Hope, and Love to those needing a brighter day in their darkest hour of need. Since inception in 2010, the ministry has served some of the world's Most Vulnerable People across more than 90 countries and counting. This mission is fulfilled daily through ministry outreach focused on Orphan Care + Prevention, Special Needs, Profound Medical Needs, and Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation. Through direct services, as well as partnerships with 12 other ministries, the Tim Tebow Foundation's Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation efforts are active in 52 countries around the world. The work of our team and partners includes 6 domestic task forces, 44 safe homes, victim outreach, care coordination, policy and advocacy work, international trainings, and capacity building, and supporting global victim identification and rescue operations.

You have a few great bills before you this Congress. "The Strengthening Child Exploitation Enforcement Act", "The Protect Our Children Act Reauthorization", "The SHIELD Act", and "The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act".

For today, I am going to focus most of my attention on the "**The Renewed Hope Act**" which addresses the need to identify and safeguard the 57,000 UNKNOWN children seen in crime scene photos that depict their rape and torture. Thank you, Chairman Biggs, Representative Laurel Lee, and Representative Wasserman Schultz for your diligent help with that bill. We look forward to having that bill marked up before this committee.

AN EPIDEMIC OF CHILD RAPE

Ten years ago, in a small town, a man started raping his two-year old stepdaughter. For our purposes I am going to call her "Jane Doe". He filmed that abuse and shared it online with other pedophiles. The girl repeatedly disclosed her abuse, but she was not believed. For this little girl, the boogie man was real, and he lived down the hall.

For ten years Jane Doe suffered.

Law enforcement around the world, tried desperately to find her. They had to watch her grow up in the images. Law enforcement attempts to locate and protect her and the thousands of children just like her, were stymied by resource shortages, encryption, and the widespread availability of VPN 's and proxies.

In 2020, the number of children in the US like Jane Doe that had their abuse images in the possession of law enforcement but had yet to be identified and safeguarded was 11,000.

In 2022, anecdotal information put that number at 20,000. In 2 years, it had almost doubled.

When I got to the Tim Tebow Foundation, Timmy, and let me just say - Thank God for Tim Tebow and the leadership team at TTF, we put these children's protection as our number one priority, and we got to work.

With the help of Jon Rouse, the former commander of Australia's Task Force Argos, and Jim Cole, former Homeland Security Special Agent, who stood up HSI's Victim Identification program, we hatched a plan – bring all the experts together from around the world with the goal of determining how many UNKNOWN victims were in the global image database at INTERPOL and operationalize a plan to find them.

The images in the INTERPOL database are the worst of the worst.

- 84% of the images are of actual sexual abuse.
- 47% contained extreme abuse including actual rape, bondage, torture, defecation, and bestiality.

The result of that meeting led Homeland Security Investigations to create the first ever Victim Identification Task Force in the United States and dubbed it "Operation Renewed Hope".

"Renewed Hope" because new advancements in technology made it possible to find the children like Jane Doe for the first time ever.

Over the course of 25 days in the summer of 2023, and the winter of 2024, this task force tentatively identified over 730 children, including Jane Doe. To date, 289 of those children have been confirmed safeguarded. Operation Renewed Hope 3 is currently underway as we speak.

Currently, there are approximately 2.6 million images of unidentified children in that one database. That number represents over 80,000 unidentified children, 57,000 of which are seen in "series", meaning they are in multiple images over time. This tells us that these children are abused by someone who has close access to them.

Based on current data of actively traded series identified at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, we know that family members are the largest category of offender in actively traded series, and of those, fathers produce more child sexual abuse images than any other type of offender category.¹

According to law enforcement, children can be heard crying in these videos and screaming for "Daddy to stop."²

¹ <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/OJJDP-NCMEC-Transparency-CY-2023-Report.pdf>

² <https://protect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Paul-Gillespie-Interview-with-CBC.pdf>

Across the globe there are several Five-Eye countries with image databases. Due to the nature of online distribution, international collaboration with INTERPOL is essential in identifying and safeguarding American children.

By way of example, the offender in Arizona rapes his children, films it, and shares it with offenders in Spain, or Germany. When those countries make an arrest, seize that offenders' devices, and analyze the images, they will find new victims, whose images then go to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation database. Since its inception, 14,000 children or almost half of the identified images in the ICSE database have been American children. This is why collaboration is so critical.

The workforce dedicated exclusively to the painstaking task of looking for clues in these images in efforts to locate these children are a few dozen specialists deep. In the US, a team of seven, including members of the HERO Corps, are seated at HSI's Victim ID program fulltime.

If half of the unidentified children in INTERPOL's database are likely American victims, that means that a team of seven must find 40,000 American victims. This is why the "Renewed Hope Act" is critical. It will increase that fulltime workforce from seven to two hundred.

THE SCALE OF HARM

In 2022, just in the United States, NCMEC referred 2.2 million actionable reports from technology companies and the public to federal, state, and local law enforcement. This does not account for child exploitation activity largely happening on the Clear Web or The Onion Router (TOR). According to the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, between 2018-2020, 5,257,763 verified CSAM media files were found on the "clear web" on platforms like Amazon, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and others.³

Over that same timeframe 150,000 media files of verified CSAM were found on TOR. TOR is a project of a US based non-profit organization.^{4, 5} According to its IRS tax form, in 2022, two-thirds of TOR's funding came from government grants.⁶

Additionally in the US, law enforcement has detected roughly 350,000 unique IP addresses seen trading these images across Peer-2-Peer networks. Based on studies of these offenders we know that:

³ https://content.c3p.ca/pdfs/C3P_ProjectArachnidReport_en.pdf

⁴ <https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/what-is-tor/>

⁵ <https://www.torproject.org/about/reports/>

⁶ <https://www.torproject.org/static/findoc/2021-2022-TheTorProject-PublicDisclosureForm990.pdf?h=22c9d0d7>

- 55% - 85% of traders are also hands on offenders. The majority of whom offend against children in their own homes and communities, with an average of 13 victims each.⁷
- 60% of producers of child sexual abuse images are related to the victim or in a position of trust. Fathers, friends of the family, teachers, pastors, doctors, and youth serving individuals.⁸
- 78.1% were White, 12.4% were Hispanic, 6.5% were Black, and 3.0% were other races.⁹

A significant number of these offenders sit behind VPNs. Many VPN providers don't keep records. To safeguard these victims, law enforcement needs providers like Amazon Web Services to require better record keeping from companies providing these services on their cloud.

Of the victims:

- 84% of the images were of actual sexual abuse.
- 47% contained extreme abuse including actual rape, bondage, torture, defecation, and bestiality.
- More than 60% of unidentified victims are under 12.
- 65% of unidentified victims were girls.
- 76.56% are White, 2.13% are Black, 9.85% are Asian, 10.12% are Hispanic-Latino.
- 4.3% of the images were infants. (Over 2,100 infants!)¹⁰

Conservatively, if even half of those 350,000 offenders have an average of 13 victims each, that's 2.2 million undetected child victims.

YOU CAN SAVE THEM

Despite the success of "Operation Renewed Hope", we cannot leave the remaining 56,000 children to languish. They need intervention and they need it quickly. The Renewed Hope Act will authorize 200 new positions for HSI, dedicated to child exploitation investigations and Victim Identification. And It will establish a world class Victim Identification training center because the better trained analysts are, the sooner we can safeguard American children.

⁷ https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/amendment-process/public-hearings-and-meetings/20120215/Testimony_15_Bourke.pdf

⁸ https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2021/20211013_Production-CP.pdf

⁹ https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/quick-facts/Child_Pornography_FY22.pdf

¹⁰ <https://ecpat.org/resource/technical-report-towards-a-global-indicator-on-unidentified-victims-in-child-sexual-exploitation-material/>

For a moment, imagine that you are a little girl like Jane Doe. Bedtime, a time for most children to snuggle with their pets, to be read books and drift off to a safe and comforting slumber, is an actual nightmare. Bedtime is filled with dread, and panic. Every night, that's how Jane Doe felt for 12 years.

When "Jane Doe" was finally protected, this is what she said:

*"When the police arrived at my house, I felt happy.
I felt that something
good will happen for me.
God! I was thrilled. I wanted to smile,
because I knew something good
will happen. It was magic!"*

Today, the fate of over 56,000 children are in your hands.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS A RISK FACTOR FOR TRAFFICKED YOUTH

Before you today is another bill titled "**The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act**". The necessity for this bill is highlighted in the 2023 Polaris study which found that "62% of trafficking survivors surveyed had been cited, arrested, or detained by law enforcement, and 80% stated those arrests were for crimes committed while they were being trafficked".¹¹

There are a lot of public misconceptions about trafficking in the US. The truth about domestic minor sex trafficking is that for girls of color and LGBTQ youth, and children with learning disabilities - the greatest dangers are from child welfare involvement, running away, being groomed online, and homelessness.

- 60% of trafficked youth have foster care histories.¹²
- 28% of trafficked youth had intellectual disabilities.¹³
- LGBTQ youth are 5x more likely to experience being trafficked.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/In-Harms-Way-How-Systems-Fail-Human-Trafficking-Survivors-by-Polaris-modified-June-2023.pdf>

¹² <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/01/207901614/finding-and-stopping-child-sex-trafficking>

¹³ Reid, J. A. (2016). Sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities: An exploratory mixed methods study. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*.

¹⁴ National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE). (2020a). Risk Factors and Indicators. *Human Trafficking in America's Schools*.

- 40% of sex trafficked youth are Black.¹⁵
- 75-80% of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border are victims of sexual abuse and trafficking before they reach the US.¹⁶
- 37% of trafficking is intrafamilial.¹⁷

To add insult to injury, these children, who have likely had a lifetime of abuse leading up to their trafficking victimization, are then cast into the justice system and treated like criminals. As detailed by organizations like Rights4Girls and Georgetown Law in reports like *Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline for Girls*, trafficking survivors are routinely coerced into committing criminal acts by their traffickers, however courts rarely consider this trauma history when assessing girls' culpability.¹⁸

Survivors of sex trafficking require law enforcement, prosecutors, and the courts to employ greater empathy and a trauma-informed lens to understand the complex trauma that often underlies a survivor's actions leading up to a criminal offense.

Sex trafficked youth are the only class of rape victim in this country that are criminalized for their abuse.

We must do better. "The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act" will go a long way towards resetting what is a terrible injustice.

¹⁵ <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cshti0810.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/R43628.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/In-Harms-Way-How-Systems-Fail-Human-Trafficking-Survivors-by-Polaris-modified-June-2023.pdf>

¹⁸ Yasmin Vafa & Rebecca Epstein, *Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline for Girls* (2023), rights4girls.org/criminalizedsurvivorsreport.org

Unique Images and Videos Reviewed by CVIP Disaggregated by Relationship Between Suspected Offender and Child Victim						
Relationship Type	CY 2021		CY 2022		CY 2023	
	Total Images/Videos	Unique Images/Videos (based on MD5 hash)	Total Images/Videos	Unique Images/Videos (based on MD5 hash)	Total Images/Videos	Unique Images/Videos (based on MD5 hash)
Aunt	3,851	2,068	3,193	1,905	3,122	2,081
Babysitter, Mentor, Coach, Teacher	234,392	127,942	119,752	69,638	115,354	58,674
Boyfriend	14,141	8,488	10,385	8,124	8,021	6,764
Brother	23,532	9,611	22,710	9,543	14,575	8,859
Brother-in-Law	4,432	2,299	4,011	2,819	2,082	1,133
Cousin	10,733	5,266	12,346	6,612	7,312	4,002
Father	934,759	399,480	692,628	376,633	845,561	362,244
Foster Sibling	546	241	826	468	804	436
Girlfriend	335	335	8	7	11	11
Grandfather	17,250	8,881	16,906	9,289	12,631	7,776
Grandmother	34	24	36	26	139	94
Guardian's Partner	273,499	116,525	148,983	77,413	390,621	164,637
Half Sibling	2,495	1,160	2,539	1,250	1,895	859
Legal Guardian	45,810	21,974	40,745	20,354	35,778	18,550
Mother	131,777	50,956	80,981	49,396	282,223	134,688
Neighbor/Family friend	444,422	209,373	338,145	172,858	383,084	212,720
Online Enticement/Self & Offender Produced	233,177	90,386	178,465	115,319	115,531	70,104
Other Relative	21,525	12,031	33,076	26,190	36,112	18,987
Photographer	175,440	77,247	92,228	53,904	185,431	80,093
Trafficking	48,478	20,423	37,472	17,547	46,666	21,340
Sister	9,909	4,024	7,163	4,199	4,227	1,995
Step-Father	191,915	80,080	166,067	100,676	173,314	74,224
Step-Grandparent	24,032	9,312	14,808	7,830	14,604	6,042
Step-Mother	4,813	2,122	3,379	1,607	3,113	1,146
Stranger	10,578	4,630	8,513	5,592	11,577	5,058
Uncle	276,524	119,621	187,597	99,164	195,602	85,222



CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING AND BLACK GIRLS

WHAT IS CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING?

Child Sex Trafficking occurs any time a person under the age of 18 exchanges any sex act for anything of value (e.g., food, shelter, money, etc.).ⁱ

WHAT MAKES A YOUTH VULNERABLE TO TRAFFICKING?

The following factors make youth vulnerable to sex trafficking and exploitation.ⁱⁱ

- A history of sexual and/or physical abuse
- Community or family instability
- Child welfare involvement, especially out-of-home foster care placement
- Being a runaway or homeless youth
- Disconnection from the education system
- Poverty

BLACK GIRLS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AT RISK

Black girls are more likely to experience the risk factors listed above. In addition, studies show that Black girls become trafficked at younger ages than their racial counterparts.ⁱⁱⁱ They are over 3x more likely to experience poverty than their white peers,^{iv} and consequently more likely to be disconnected from schools and other community supports.^v Black girls also witness and experience multiple forms of violence at higher rates than their white peers.^{vi}

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS ARE BLACK GIRLS

- Of the more than 10,000 cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, nearly 40% were Black women and girls—the highest of any racial group.^{vii}
- In Louisiana, 89% of the state's child sex trafficking victims were girls and 54% were Black.^{viii}
- In King County, Washington, 92% of child sex trafficking victims are female and 41% are Black, though Black people only comprise 7% of the population.^{ix}
- In LA County, two-thirds of trafficked youth are Black, though only 7.4% of the child population in LA is Black.^x

THE ADULTIFICATION OF BLACK GIRLS CONTRIBUTES TO THEIR CRIMINALIZATION

“Adultification” is a unique form of intersectional bias against Black girls that perceives them as older and less innocent than their white peers.^{xi} According to research:

- Black girls are perceived as more adult-like than their white peers at almost every stage of childhood, starting at age 5, peaking at ages 10 to 14, and continuing into older adolescence.^{xii}
- Stereotypes that are attributed to Black women^{xiii} are projected onto Black girls, leading to their hypersexualization and the perception that Black girls exercise more agency when engaging in the commercial sex trade even when they are too young to consent.^{xiv}
- Studies show that Black girls are seen to be less traumatized by child sexual abuse than their peers,^{xv} more likely to be blamed for their victimization,^{xvi} and are subject to harsher treatment due to being seen as more responsible for their actions.^{xvii}
- On average, only 30% of Black youth are characterized as victims compared to 66% of their white counterparts.^{xviii}
- Black children are over 5x more likely to be arrested on prostitution charges than their white peers.^{xix}

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. Thank you, Ms. Cooper, and thank all our witnesses for their opening statements.

Mr. Raskin, are you ready to go?

So, Mr. Raskin, we recognize you for your opening statement.

Mr. RASKIN. I thank you for kindly for your indulgence, Mr. Chair, and greetings to our witnesses. Thank you for your testimony which I know is harrowing and difficult in some cases, and I thank you for your public service.

Trafficking is modern-day slavery, and it reflects a time of cruelty and barbarity when everything is for sale, not just public office and government, but human beings, people, women, children, laborers.

We know that labor trafficking, sex trafficking, the child sex abuse material are all flourishing online.

Alas, the social media companies have been pushed to remove all guardrails against objectionable content on their platforms which is called censorship.

The result has not been a free speech utopia but a dystopian nightmare. Social media has become a cesspool of scams targeting the elderly, cyber bullying aimed at children and linked to escalating suicide rates, misinformation exploiting the victims of disasters, natural and unnatural, racist and antisemitic hatred and vilification, and foreign disinformation and propaganda, undermining democratic elections and social trust.

All of this has been a boon for the sex traffickers while reduced content moderation has also led to an explosion of child sex abuse material online.

So, we want to prevent the government from becoming a barren hellscape like the social media platforms have become. We cannot allow them to dismantle the government programs and Federal funding that actually protect children and teens and aid the victims of human trafficking.

We rely on law enforcement and personnel from Homeland Security, the FBI, the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force program, which is a national network of 61 different task forces to target the people that are preying on children and women.

Just last week, we learned that the Department of Homeland Security has ordered its entire investigative division—6,000 agents—to stop focusing on drug dealers, terrorists, and human traffickers, and instead prioritize, you guessed it, immigration enforcement.

The child pornographers, the drug networks, and the human traffickers must be uncorking their champagne bottles about the diversion of all the other law enforcement resources to work on the mass round-up and deportation of immigrants.

We've got an entire ecosystem of groups working to help here. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which receives 81 percent of its funding from the Federal Government, does an essential job.

Without Federal funding and not-for-profits—and there are people determined to dismantle the Federal funding—NCMEC and those that support victims by providing housing, emergency shelter, food, clothing, and so on, may have a much more difficult time being able to find the victims and survivors, the people who are willing to cooperate with investigations and prosecutions.

My bottom line is, I want to thank you for everything that all are doing, and I hope that we will invest carefully in the public programs and the funded not-for-profit programs that are actually working to confront this nightmare in our time.

I yield back to you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman yields back. I now recognize myself for my five minutes.

Ms. Bruggeman, you're the Executive Director of Freedom Network, and so I assume you're familiar with your organization's finances and budget?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. That's correct.

Mr. BIGGS. Will you please share with the Committee the dollar amount Freedom Network received in grants from the Federal Government in 2023, please.

If you don't have an exact number—

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. I don't have the exact number in front of me. I think that was in my disclosure form. We do have currently three grants and one sub award. They're a three-year award, so the funding is received but is to be used over the course of three years.

Mr. BIGGS. Yes, the 990 indicates that you received about \$1.3 million, and that was about 87.7 percent of your funding.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. That's correct.

Mr. BIGGS. Is that accurate?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. That sounds accurate.

Mr. BIGGS. Let's put those up.

You're getting nearly 90 percent of what you do funded by American taxpayers. Can you advocate for legalization of prostitution? Is that fair?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. We advocate for the decriminalization, Mr. Biggs. It is not the same as legalization.

Mr. BIGGS. You also advocate for open borders, right?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. We advocate for a safe way to allow migrants to move to attain safety and support for themselves and their children, yes.

Mr. BIGGS. I have here a document from the National Center on Sexual Exploitation that protests your testimony today because the legalization, or full decriminalization, of commercial sex does two things:

- (1) Expands the trade, thereby expanding the demand for more prostitution, typically satisfied by manipulating vulnerable people, including youth and those experiencing poverty, homelessness, addiction, and undocumented status; and
- (2) it prevents law enforcement from being able to identify sex trafficking victims, including minors.

So, without objection, I introduce this letter and the packet from the National Center on Sexual Exploitation.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. I would argue that—

Mr. BIGGS. There's no question for you right now, Ms. Bruggeman.

I'll go now to you, Ms. Lopez. The vacatur statute in Arizona that you worked on with Representative Gress in Arizona, that was to protect victims of trafficking who sometimes get caught up with

committing crimes themselves. I wanted you to explain that and how you got that through.

Ms. LOPEZ. Thank you for the question, Chair Biggs. Yes. I like to find laws that are completely outdated and useless when it comes to protecting survivors, and the vacatur law was one of those in Arizona. It had an effective date of crimes prior to, like, 1987, something.

I presented it to Representative Gress, and I said,

We need to update this because the issue that we have currently are survivors that were charged with prostitution, because somehow automatically at the age of 18, somehow you're consenting to what's happening to you, when you're really being trafficked.

You're charged with prostitution or some other petty crime, which is not uncommon for those that are hungry, and the trafficker is controlling their aspects of eating or drinking, so they steal food to eat.

Being able to update this law, which was supported unanimously through the House and the Senate on both sides, and now it allows survivors who have these charges to be able to fill out a form and request to meet with the judge and hopefully get those set aside, so that way they can apply for background checks, of course—

Mr. BIGGS. Then, they get a clear record, and they can live a normal life after that, to a certain extent?

Ms. LOPEZ. Well, yes. With a vacatur law, it is not expungement, so they still show up on a fingerprint clearance card absolutely.

Mr. BIGGS. Right.

Ms. LOPEZ. The microphone shut off. Yes, but they can go on. It gives them hope. Somebody who maybe wants to be a teacher can now apply to be a teacher. Somebody who wants to be a nurse, such in my case, I became a nurse, and I was able to do that.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you for that, and I know that there's additional work to be done on Arizona's law as well, so we'll be talking about that.

I want to go to you, Ms. Basham, for a moment. So, human trafficking, child trafficking, that happens across borders as well.

Ms. BASHAM. Correct.

Mr. BIGGS. When you have misplaced 330,000-plus children, which the previous administration did through its ORR programs, those children, some being placed in sponsors who were running strip clubs, dozens going to the same address, same person, without vetting, that makes them more vulnerable to human sex trafficking?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely, yes.

Mr. BIGGS. My time is expired. I appreciate that. I'm going to recognize now the Ranking Member, Ms. McBath, for five minutes.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In a memorandum dated January 27, 2025, the Office of Management and Budget's Acting Director instructed the heads of all Executive Departments and agencies to effectuate a temporary pause on Federal grants, loans, and other financial assistance—that's the OMB memo—slated to begin the next day, January 28, 2025, at 5 p.m.

The funding pause applied to, (1) the issuance of new awards; (2) the disbursement of Federal funds under all open awards; and

(3) any other relevant agency actions that may be implicated by Trump's Executive Orders.

Ms. Bruggeman, what did this memo mean for the organizations and the Freedom Network, and also, what was the immediate response to this memo by members of your organization?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. The response to the memo was widespread fear, confusion, frustration. Organizations—the funding that is issued by the Federal Government is reimbursement funding. By cutting off the funding with such little notice, not only were people not able to determine whether they'd be able to continue serving folks going forward, but also weren't sure they were going to be paid the money that they were already due from the Federal Government.

Immediately, people within our network had to lay off staff and stopped accepting new clients, denying services and support to the very victims that we've been talking about this morning.

That includes legal services, housing, case management, and assistance through the legal process to clear their criminal records. All these services were immediately in great peril.

Ms. MCBATH. How did your Executive Director of the Freedom Network anticipate this memo would affect victims and survivors of human trafficking?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Well, what we know is that when programs are not available, victims are stuck with nowhere to go. They stay with their traffickers. They do not—they are not able to access safe housing, alternative jobs, food, shelter, medical and mental health services, substance abuse services, all the critical services that they need to leave the trafficking situation, heal, and then if they're—pursue justice either through a civil case or in working with law enforcement.

Without those services and support, they remain in the trafficker's orbit and continue to be abused and exploited.

Ms. MCBATH. Let me ask, does your organization encourage prostitution or open borders? Please explain your position and why.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes, thank you so much for that question. We do not promote any form of work. What we promote is human rights. All workers deserve human rights. No one should be criminalized for the work that they do, either because they have no other choice or because it's the work that they choose.

There is a full spectrum of reasons why people do any type of work. Not everyone is as privileged as myself to choose to do legal work in a safe office. For those who are left with choices that are less safe, we have to improve their safety.

That is the approach we take to all other sectors of the workforce, and we should take that same approach with sex work as well, improve the safety.

Ms. MCBATH. The bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Act was first signed into law by President Clinton in 2000 and has since been reauthorized a number of times.

Can you please explain how and why the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was first developed?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Absolutely. At the time in the 1990s, there were a host of cases of forced labor and sex trafficking that involved a lot of extreme psychological coercion. The laws we had on

the books at the time did not recognize these types of forced fraud and coercion.

At the same time, there were no programs for the survivors, and so they were trapped within the trafficking situation.

Many trafficking victims are living with their traffickers, and so, leaving the trafficker means needing a safe place to live.

In recognizing both that survivors needed better services to rebuild their lives and to engage with the legal system, the TVPA was created to accomplish both of those goals.

Ms. MCBATH. I have one more question for you. Where do any gaps in services to victims and providers exist, if there are any, and how could legislation effectively address those gaps?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. There are many gaps—

Mr. BIGGS. The gentlelady's time is expired, but you may answer the question.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Thank you so much. There are many gaps remaining. We need more funding. We need more support. We need to be allowed to really identify communities most at risk, and direct our programs specifically to their needs, to their experiences, and to their situation. We need more housing, medical care, and mental healthcare. Case management services are always critical.

Ms. MCBATH. Mr. Chair, I have a unanimous consent request. I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record a research brief from the *ACLU*, titled, "Is Sex Work Decriminalization the Answer?" What the research tells us, a comprehensive review of more than 80 studies on the decriminalization and criminalization of sex work, which revealed there is no clear link between criminalizing sex work and stopping human trafficking.

Mr. BIGGS. OK. So, you can—if you want to read from it, like I did, next time you need to do it in your five minutes, which is what I did.

We're going to go with Mr. Tiffany for five minutes.

Mr. TIFFANY. I thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Cooper, how can social media companies help? I view, especially with young males, that pornography is kind of a gateway drug to stuff like this that happens.

How could the social media companies help, and have you identified ways that they could be—to stem the tide of this proliferation?

Ms. COOPER. Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that question. It's a great question.

Under our current legal framework in the United States, social media companies have to report CSAM that they find on their networks but only if they see it. They don't have to proactively look for it, and I think that proactive detection is probably the most significant action the technology companies could take in this country to look for the material and then remove it. So that would be the first thing.

The second thing is, a lot of the social media companies, like Meta, provide encryption on their services like WhatsApp, and WhatsApp—CSAM is proliferating across that particular application because it's encrypted, and it provides safe harbor for pedophiles all over the world.

Mr. TIFFANY. Have any States taken action? First, I'm not sure of the legality. Can they? Have any States taken action in this regard?

Ms. COOPER. Some of the States are looking at things like age assurance and age verification issues to be able to block content for minors.

Then some States are looking at ways to be able to sort of block the efforts of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces by preventing them from being able to collect what's called attribution data in their investigation.

You kind of have both things happening at the State level. It's a bit of patchwork. We have some laws that have been passed, like in Utah, that have problems, and we have some laws that are passed in other States that are working toward age verification.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you.

Ms. Lopez, is prostitution a component of human trafficking in your experience?

Ms. LOPEZ. Well, it is a result of being trafficked. It's not a choice by the victim.

Mr. TIFFANY. It's a component of human trafficking?

Ms. LOPEZ. It is, absolutely, because somebody is paying for a service.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes. Is it helpful to your cause to encourage prostitution?

Ms. LOPEZ. No.

Mr. TIFFANY. It is not helpful?

Ms. LOPEZ. To encourage prostitution?

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes. That does not help to limit human trafficking.

Ms. LOPEZ. No.

Mr. TIFFANY. Is that right?

Ms. LOPEZ. Well, if you're saying that prostitution is OK, it opens the door for anybody to say, OK, well, I'm going to say this child who's 17, but looks like they're 21, let's go ahead and prostitute them, and we're not going to be held liable.

Mr. TIFFANY. In other words legalizing prostitution is not going to be helpful to your cause?

Ms. LOPEZ. No, not at all.

Mr. TIFFANY. Ms. Basham, are you familiar with something referred to as rape trees?

Ms. BASHAM. Not extensively, no.

Mr. TIFFANY. Microphone.

Ms. BASHAM. No, not extensively.

Mr. TIFFANY. OK. When I was down to Arizona on one of the trips with Mr. Biggs, an Arizona sheriff shared how the gangs, if I recall this correctly, they will hang a woman's underwear when they would bring her in from a foreign country when they were trafficked into the United States. Those were rape trees. I'm sorry to have to share it on such explicit terms.

Is it helpful to secure the Southern border to prevent some human trafficking in the United States of America?

Ms. BASHAM. Well, let me give you this analogy. If you take excellent care of your children in your house, you are going to lock your door at night, and I believe very firmly that, first, a lot of

these children—we know this now, we are not in the dark—they are being raped along the journey here.

It's a horrific set of circumstances that they are facing here, and by having porous borders, what it actually ends up doing is, it becomes a push-pull factor, and it actually encourages this.

The biggest thing with human trafficking in general is it's a crime. It's very different than every other human rights abuse because it's not just slavery. It is slavery, but human trafficking is actually, at its core, part of the advanced criminal networks.

That's why it's such a big deal, and it is part of this Committee explicitly. So, yes, I absolutely believe that every country needs to have authority over their borders, and I believe that there should be no incentivization for someone to try to cross those borders because otherwise what you get is, you get children who are caught in the middle, and they become the commodity.

Mr. TIFFANY. Securing our borders will help prevent human trafficking?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely.

Mr. TIFFANY. I yield back.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you.

We've been called to votes. I think there's just one vote. I would urge us to go over, vote quickly, and come back. I tried to poll, see who's available to come back. I think most everybody can.

I'd ask the witnesses to stay close. We're going to go into recess until 10 minutes after the vote, so probably 20–30 minutes, somewhere in there. With that, we're going to be in recess.

[Recess.]

Mr. BIGGS. The Subcommittee is called back to order. Others are on the way back from voting. Thank you all for being here.

The Chair recognizes the Ranking Member of the entire Committee, Mr. Raskin, for his five minutes.

Mr. RASKIN. Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

The most famous child sex trafficker of our time I would venture a guess is Jeffrey Epstein, a man of extraordinary wealth, power, influence, and connection. A good friend of Donald Trump's, actually, and other politicians who used his resources to exploit girls.

I'm wondering if—Ms. Bruggeman, perhaps you could start—if you would explain basically how sex traffickers work and how they are able to get access to underaged girls and to exploit them for other purposes?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Thank you for the question.

Sex traffickers work in many different ways to target vulnerabilities of the individuals they are targeting to exploit. For young people, it's often through grooming, through approaching them and offering things that they're not getting at home, whether that's—

Mr. RASKIN. So, in his case, he had a woman—I think her last name was Maxwell—who worked with him, and then she would procure the girls by giving them gifts, money, clothing, or invitations to parties, that kind of thing?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. My understanding is that, yes, there were people being approached and offered financial rewards, benefits, and opportunity to come to parties, but we're not told exactly what was being expected of them, what would happen once they arrived, and

then they had difficulty to not consent to what was happening and were trapped in that situation.

Mr. RASKIN. Yes. So, they tended to be poor or vulnerable from a more—like, a broken home or dysfunctional family situation, right?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes. I think what we heard from our witnesses is that people are targeted in different ways. It might be because they were low-income. It might be because they have an insecure immigration status. It might be because they're queer and not being respected by their communities. It might be because they're seeking validation and love and attention. So, there are lots of ways to target folks.

Mr. RASKIN. OK. You had an interesting colloquy about the law of prostitution. I know that's not what this is about, but I'm just wondering, did the law criminalizing prostitution and putting women in jail for prostitution help any of the girls who were trafficked by Jeffrey Epstein and his network?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Exactly. No. The criminalization of people engaging in the selling of sex does not help anyone. It makes them more vulnerable, more at risk, and unable to come forward for assistance if they do experience abuse and exploitation, and the criminal records, as we've heard, follow them throughout their entire lives.

Mr. RASKIN. OK. I've got an article I would like to submit for the record, "Elon Musk's business empire is built on \$38 billion in government funding,"—if I could, from *The Washington Post*.

Mr. BIGGS. Without objection.

Mr. RASKIN. That's a lot of money. People are getting a lot of money from the U.S. Government for different purposes, and I hope that our Oversight Committee will be able to figure out the waste, fraud, and abuse in a lot of these programs.

How much money—you were asked the question how much money does your organization get, and I know you're a consortium of how many different organizations?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Right. We do have 89 different members. We also have staff ourselves. We receive direct Federal funds to run a program to help survivors clear their criminal records. We provide training and technical assistance to housing providers, and we're also working on other training and technical assistance programs, and then our members have different funding that they get directly.

Mr. RASKIN. How much money did you get in government grants and funds?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. We get the amount—as Mr. Biggs pointed out, I think it was around two million in that one-year—

Mr. RASKIN. Two billion?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Million.

Mr. RASKIN. Oh, two million. OK.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes.

Mr. RASKIN. I was talking about Musk with \$38 billion, and you said \$2 million for all the consortium—

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. For over a period of three years.

Mr. RASKIN. Perhaps I would come to you, Ms. Lopez. What would the effect be of actually demolishing government funds and

grants to all these organizations? There are some people who just want to shut it all down. What would that mean?

Ms. LOPEZ. I can't speak to other organizations, but I can tell you Pearl at the Mailbox will never accept government grants.

Mr. RASKIN. How come you don't accept government grants?

Ms. LOPEZ. Because we want to be able to continuously employ the people that we choose to employ, and we don't want to be beholden to another agency that tells us what to do.

Mr. RASKIN. OK. Ms. Cooper, what do you think the effect would be of a shutdown in government funding?

Ms. COOPER. Well, antihuman trafficking and child exploitation efforts have been historically underfunded. So, really, we need more funding for enforcement efforts for demand reduction.

That it's really important to clarify that there's good funding and there's bad funding. Good funding needs to go to support law enforcement. It needs to go to support survivor care. It needs to go to support legal services. Bad funding would be funding that supports the full decriminalization, and that means funding that supports decriminalizing brothel keeping, pimping, and sex buying. What we need is an increase in efforts to enforce those third-party profiteers that profit from prostitution.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you very much.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize the gentleman from Alabama, Mr. Moore.

Mr. MOORE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate all the witnesses being here today.

I understand Pam Bondi said that they're going to release the flight logs of the Lolita Express—Jeffrey Epstein's planes—coming out today, and we're asking for them to be unredacted. We want to know who was on the flights. I understand there were 200 victims in that process. We will indeed get to the bottom of that. I'm grateful President Trump has the courage and the willingness to put the names on a list and let everybody know what was going on at this island that Epstein owned.

Anyway, Ms. Basham, can you maybe break down the funding that—the trafficking funding that was put in by 45, President Trump, as opposed to the Biden Administration? What was the difference between the budgets we spent on antitrafficking between those administrations? Do you know off the top of your head?

Ms. BASHAM. Yes, I know some of that off the top of my head. So, just as a background, I did used to work at the Department of Justice. I was in senior leadership there actually at the Office for Victims of Crime, which is the largest Federal under of domestic antitrafficking efforts in the Nation.

I can tell you this, that under the last year of President Trump's Administration in 2020, it was allocated that over \$100 million in a single Fiscal Year just from the Department of Justice for domestic antitrafficking efforts. This is the largest ever given in any administration.

I do agree with Representative McBath when she said at the beginning that antitrafficking efforts need to be prioritized. That's absolutely the case.

Additionally, \$35 million was allocated for shelters. Shelters, as Ms. Bruggeman mentioned, are one of the most essential parts to

the recovery of survivors of trafficking. They are the foundation. We have got to have funding for shelters. Since that time, the funding has dropped to about half—in many years, less than half of that \$35 million—and it has never come back up. That's with inflation.

Mr. MOORE. The Biden Administration, even with inflation, cut funding to less than half than what President Trump was spending.

Explain to me the shelter. Now, how is that such an integral part? You don't have to go in detail, because I have got some other questions that I want to ask Ms. Cooper and some of the others, but how does that help the process? Does it get folks off the streets? Is that kind of what happens?

Ms. BASHAM. Yes. You have to have safe shelter. Any survivor of trafficking, a lot of times when they leave, they are in a very dangerous situation. They need a place that's safe, and they actually need a place with wraparound services so that they can fully recover and then move on with their lives. That usually takes at least a year, sometimes two years for long-term care.

Mr. MOORE. Ms. Cooper, you mentioned the unidentified 56,000 children—I believe it was the number you told us—where these kids, we know they have been victimized by family members or whatever the case may be, which is incredibly tragic. Do you think facial recognition will help? Is that something down the road that our law enforcement agents will be able to use to try to identify these children and get them out of those harmful situations?

Ms. COOPER. Yes. Actually, facial recognition is a game changer for that purpose, because children's faces are in the photographs, and I think that it has led to quite a number of successful identifications and rescues of children that have been seen in that database. So, Homeland Security investigations, the FBI, all our Federal and State partners need to be able to have permission to use that technology. It's a game changer.

Mr. MOORE. How much money do you get or your organization—the Tebow organization—get from the Federal Government?

Ms. COOPER. Nothing.

Mr. MOORE. Not a dime. You all get—what, \$30 million a year is your budget? Is that right?

Ms. COOPER. Yes. Our budget is significantly higher than that because we do have some organizations that are sort of subsidiaries of us. I think that, right now, we're at about \$50 million that we give out.

Mr. MOORE. Thank you. Tell Mr. Tebow we appreciate your efforts.

Ms. Lopez, Pearl at the Mailbox. Wow. What a name. Tell me, how does that work? I know you only got about, well, 60 seconds or so, but tell me a little bit about Pearl at the Mailbox and what you do in your organization.

Ms. LOPEZ. So, at Pearl at the Mailbox, we work on prevention. There are many organizations that work on the post-rescue, but there's not a lot of people working on the prevention side. If we can teach people to spot it and stop the grooming process, we have a better chance of protecting children from going into trafficking.

Mr. MOORE. How do parents and grandparents—what is one of the signs that you think maybe we as parents and grandparents might miss? What is something that—I know you need to be involved in your children’s lives, and we certainly are, but tell me, is there a certain thing that you recommend? Maybe a two or three bullet-point, hey, here’s what parents and grandparents need to be looking for?

Ms. LOPEZ. In my case, I would always say—and other survivors:

- It’s the behavior that changes before words are ever used to say what’s going on. If a child is behaving differently, wanting to spend more time away from home, maybe have new friends, just things to look at.
- We’ve lost our ability to listen to our intuition, and we forget that, OK, maybe we need to pay attention because something is not right in our home.
- I say that the schools are the missing link. We don’t have enough preventive education in our schools.

Mr. MOORE. Thank you.

I’ll yield back, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. The gentleman yields back.

Now, I want to include into the record without objection an acknowledgment of the good work of Mr. Goldman when he was prosecuting and breaking up an international sex trafficking conspiracy. That was good work, and I want to highlight that for you, Mr. Goldman.

With that, I yield five minutes to you.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Thank you very much for that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. BIGGS. Actually, I’m going to rescind that yielding because Mr. Cohen got here just in the nick of time before you started, and I promised him he could go next.

Mr. RASKIN. You stand by the praise nonetheless.

Mr. BIGGS. Yes. I stand by the praise. I stand by the praise.

Mr. GOLDMAN. As long as you reiterate it again before I go.

Mr. BIGGS. I know you like that stuff,

So, Mr. Cohen, I yield to you for five minutes.

Mr. COHEN. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I listened to your testimony and appreciated your issue, and I’ve got a bill on this, the SOAR bill, which you may know about. Ms. Basham did mention it in a list of bills she mentioned.

I want to ask each of you, have any of you heard of either Andrew or Tristan Tate?

Ms. Bruggeman, what do you know about Andrew and Tristan Tate?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. I understand that they’re accused of sex trafficking internationally, and there’s questions about the jurisdiction and their freedom of movement at this time.

Mr. COHEN. Thank you. Anybody else know about them? Ms. Cooper, what do you know about them?

Ms. COOPER. I just am aware of what I read in the news, that there’s several cases pending.

Mr. COHEN. They are social activists and whatever they call them? Influencers?

Ms. COOPER. Influencers. Correct.

Mr. COHEN. Right. They're no longer having their travel restricted. They were allowed—given their U.S. passports back today, and they flew a plane, allegedly, straight to Ft. Lauderdale. There are allegations that there was involvement from our administration, the Trump Administration, that they got Romanian pressure for Romania to release them. They've got some pretty serious charges against them for rape and sex trafficking in Romania and also in England.

What do you think the odds of them returning to Romania are after they've been released with their U.S. passports, Ms. Bruggeman?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. My assumption would be very low.

Mr. COHEN. Yes. Thank you. Anybody else have an opinion? Well, that just happened today. It's pretty startling what they've done. They're dual U.S.–U.K. citizens and not good folks.

Let me ask you, are you all familiar with—where's my—here I am. Are you familiar with any grants that have been restricted by the Trump Administration here in the Executive Orders that affect your particular entities, Ms. Bruggeman?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes. There was grant funding from HHS for direct services for trafficking victims that were halted for about two weeks, leaving providers without access to funding and uncertain if they would be able to continue supporting those survivors with housing, food, medical care, and legal services.

Also, we have seen halting of funding internationally from USAID and the State Department that have ended critical human trafficking work internationally, but also, that were hiring survivors here in the United States as consultants and experts in developing those programs who have lost their livelihood when their contracts were canceled.

Mr. COHEN. This would be damaging to arresting sex traffickers in the future, would it not?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Absolutely. Without building that capacity and that expertise based on the knowledge of survivors, we're unable to actually effectively stop trafficking labor and sex trafficking. Any restriction, any halting, any stopping of that work—of that critical work—is a gift to traffickers.

Mr. COHEN. Are the other ladies familiar with any grants that might be held up? No?

Ms. Bruggeman, you have been an expert in this. Do you think your being an expert in this area makes you more likely to be aware of these issues than if you were an expert in rocket propulsion or electric cars?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes, of course.

Mr. COHEN. Thank you. The DOJ office that administers the Office of Victims of Crime and the Office of Violence Against Women and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, all which fund important antitrafficking exploitation programs—they've been threatened to be slashed as well. Are you familiar with that?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes, sir. We're very concerned about the ideas that those offices—the staff would be slashed. We need those staff to help administer these grants and make sure that the funding continues to move forward, that everything is reviewed, and programs are provided with the support they need.

Mr. COHEN. When we look at budgeting—and we’ve been given by the judiciary areas of over \$100 million to look at budgeting—do you think these areas are more important to stop sex trafficking than building a border wall?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. I do.

Mr. COHEN. I would like to thank you.

I would like to mention my bill that I had introduced to reauthorize the SOAR Act, which was to give people training to identify people that have been sex-trafficked. It was law. We got it passed through the House and stopped in the Senate for funding problems, but it has been reintroduced, and I hope that you all will encourage your Senators to support it. It failed last time for whatever reason, and the House had passed it pretty much unanimously. It was successful. Between September 2017–2023, they hosted more than 200 events and trained over 260,000 healthcare professionals across the country.

Thank you very much, and thank you for your testimony.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman’s time has expired.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. Kiley.

Mr. KILEY. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for your testimony.

As we have held hearings on this topic the last few years, the numbers and the scale of the problem continues to be absolutely horrifying, and it’s particularly alarming the prevalence of these horrors here in the United States and the number of victims.

I do think there is some cause for encouragement that we have an opportunity to start to turn a corner and to help prevent these crimes and to help victims and to stop there from being even more victims going forward.

First, of course, is that we have an entirely different situation at the border, which is connected to this problem.

Second, that there is a growing realization that we need to use the full force of the criminal code to hold traffickers accountable. I’ll give you one quick example of that. In my State of California, there was a bill that said, “Well, we should classify trafficking of a minor as serious as a violent offense, a serious felony.”

Incredibly, the State assembly’s public safety Committee initially voted not to do that. They said, “No, this is not going to be considered a serious crime.” However, the public backlash was so great that they eventually reconvened and held a revote, and that bill made it all the way through and was signed into law by the Governor. Now, it is actually considered a serious felony with real consequences in California, and I think that there’s more we need to do under both State law in California as well as under Federal law.

Third, the area that is very important and was mentioned by Ms. Lopez is education. Actually, a good example—a good law that we have in California is one that is designed to promote prevention education in schools. There’s an organization based near my district, 3Strands Global, that has pioneered a lot of very good education efforts in classrooms.

Finally, I’ve introduced the National Human Trafficking Database Act. This is a piece of bipartisan legislation. Mr. Johnson on this Committee is a coauthor. What this will do is establish a na-

tional human trafficking database at DOJ as well as incentivize certain State law enforcement agencies to report to the database.

So, reported data would include data that indicates the presence and prevalence of human trafficking for every county in every State, the names of all antitrafficking organizations operating in each county, the total number of State-level human trafficking organizations collected in coordination with local DAs, and then as I mentioned, there would also be—it would also incentivize States to submit this data by directing DOJ's Office for Victims of Crime to award grants to States to collect and submit the data authorizing \$50 million per fiscal year. I also want to thank Ms. Hageman, also on this Committee, for authoring this bill with me as well.

I believe, Ms. Basham, you mentioned this issue in your testimony.

Maybe, Ms. Lopez, if you wanted to just expound on the education—the importance of the education piece of this and then, Ms. Basham, as far as the data collection goes?

Ms. LOPEZ. Thank you. Education is key. That seems to be what's lacking. If you spend resources to educate individuals about what human trafficking is, and the grooming process that leads to trafficking, people have the ability to understand it.

We teach our children how to drive cars, and it's a process before they get a license. Why are we not teaching the children how to spot when somebody is trying to harm them such as a predator, whether it be in person or online? That is lacking throughout all our country and specifically in Arizona. We can't get these programs in our schools. We need to focus on education for prevention purposes.

Ms. BASHAM. Thank you so much.

There are two key reasons why data is important, and specifically this National Human Trafficking Database Act:

First, it actually funds State law enforcement, and as we all know, law enforcement tends to be historically underfunded and especially when it comes to trafficking. They just don't have enough resources. It actually brings the money directly where we need it most so that every State in the Nation can have that money for their State law enforcement.

Second, the word "data," unfortunately, is not an exciting word. There isn't adrenaline with it. Those numbers represent individuals. Data is people. Every single number is a person. The number one biggest gap, in my opinion, in trafficking is victim identification. It sits at about 0.4 percent. Over 99 percent of victims are never identified, and the National Human Trafficking Database Act helps us to see what we're not currently seeing.

Mr. KILEY. Thank you very much for your work and your advocacy, and I yield back.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman yields.

Mr. Raskin, do you have some UCs?

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you, Mr. Chair, two. "The girls were just so young: The horrors of Jeffrey Epstein's private island"—that's *Vanity Fair*, and "Listen to the Jeffrey Epstein tapes: I was Donald Trump's closest friend," in *The Daily Beast*.

Mr. BIGGS. Without objection.

Also, without objection, Mr. Fry will be permitted to participate in today's hearing for the purpose of questioning the witnesses if a Member yields time for that purpose.

Now are you ready, Mr. Goldman?

Mr. GOLDMAN. Ready.

Mr. BIGGS. OK. I yield time to you, Mr. Goldman.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You are right. I supervised sex trafficking cases in the Southern District of New York, and based on that experience as well as 10 years of experience prosecuting other cases, I can say with great certainty that victims of sex trafficking in particular are the most traumatized and stigmatized and difficult witnesses. I don't mean difficult in presenting difficulties, but that it is incredibly difficult to have victims feel comfortable coming forward to testify, which often is required to hold people accountable.

I just want to make sure that we are all in agreement here that Federal funding is essential to fighting online exploitation and sex trafficking.

Ms. Lopez, do you agree with that?

Ms. LOPEZ. Yes and no.

Mr. GOLDMAN. All right. Well, I know you don't take it, but you don't accept it, you said, but you do support the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act, do you not?

Ms. LOPEZ. I do. I believe there's a place for Federal funding.

Mr. GOLDMAN. All right. I just want to make sure. Ms. Cooper?

Ms. COOPER. The right kind of Federal funding. Funding that supports—

Mr. GOLDMAN. Ms. Basham?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely, yes.

Mr. GOLDMAN. I assume Ms. Bruggeman as well?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Yes, of course.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Now, Ms. Bruggeman, tell me a little bit about how online exploitation of victims' influences—well, occurs and also influences the willingness of other victims to come forward?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Sure. Online exploitation happens in a lot of different ways as technology continues to evolve, and online services are used for both labor and sex trafficking. Recruiters use online spaces to recruit workers with false promises of jobs and then bring them in and traffic them throughout our country.

Sex traffickers also use online spaces to identify and groom people—we're talking in games, in apps, in online chats—and then also use online spaces to share, advertise, and sell—

Mr. GOLDMAN. Right. It's a very common method for sex traffickers to prey on victims, right?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Absolutely. As our society has moved online, so have the criminals.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Right. If there were a social media king, for example, who has expressed support for sex trafficking, would that be a concern of sex trafficking victims in your experience?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. I would think absolutely, yes.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Well, I just want to put up a photo here. This is Elon Musk in 2014 with Ghislaine Maxwell. Mr. Raskin had mentioned Ghislaine Maxwell was the right-hand person for Jeffrey Epstein's sex trafficking operation of minors.

Mr. Cohen spoke earlier—and I want to return to this—about these individuals, Andrew Tate and Tristan Tate. They were charged in December 2022 with human trafficking, trafficking of minors, rape including minors, money laundering, and organized crime charges. In March 2024, the British police obtained an arrest warrant for them based on an investigation into rape and human trafficking.

If anyone wants to go online and get a sense of this Andrew Tate, you should. I can't quote almost anything he says because it is so vile and misogynistic that it is not appropriate for a morning television show.

Last week, there was an article in *The Financial Times* about how the Trump Administration was pressuring Romania to lift restrictions on the Tate brothers and to allow them to leave Romania, and lo and behold, what do you know? Just today, they were released from house arrest, given their passports back, and flew on a private plane to Florida. I can assure you they will never return to Britain or Romania to face these charges.

For five years, Andrew Tate's account on Twitter was banned, but when Elon Musk took it back over in November 2022, he reinstated him and gave him a social platform to continue their sex trafficking and their illegal conduct.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Mr. Chair I think we ought to take a very close look at these social media companies and their role in the online exploitation of sex trafficking.

Mr. BIGGS. The gentleman's time has expired.

The Chair now recognizes the Chair of the whole Committee, Mr. Jordan, for five minutes.

Chair JORDAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate you having this hearing today.

I want to give my time to the gentleman from South Carolina.

Mr. FRY. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Biggs, for having this hearing.

I want to dive in. Ms. Basham, you dedicated most of your career to combating human trafficking, and I think no one would question your expertise in this field. How many human trafficking cases are prosecuted at the Federal level in this country?

Ms. BASHAM. Yes. So, in 2023, it was around 1,000, and the year before that, it was around 1,600.

Mr. FRY. During these prosecutions and your review of them, do you think there are adequate protections for victims of human trafficking who may have been forced to commit nonviolent crimes by their traffickers?

Ms. BASHAM. No. There's a huge gap.

Mr. FRY. Do you think that is a serious problem in our Federal system of laws that we don't have those protections?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely. I think it's covered in severalfold: One through the vacature and expungement, as I mentioned, but also, through providing civil legal services at the Federal level and allocating funding through the Office on Violence Against Women.

Mr. FRY. So, that being said, this year, I reintroduced the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act along with colleagues that really span

the ideological spectrum. This is a truly nonpartisan piece of legislation.

With that particular legislation, would that close some of the loopholes in our legal system and provide adequate protection for victims?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely. One of the other ones I want to mention is the right for affirmative defense from the outset.

That is one of the biggest reasons—one of the biggest questions is why would someone be deemed both a victim of trafficking by the court, and then at the same time, want their crimes vacated? Well, the reason is that, oftentimes, they don't have the right to have that affirmative defense. That affirmative defense is what makes is crystal clear to the judge and to the court from the beginning. It lets them really look at the case and say: Is this a victim of trafficking?

Instead, what happens is the crime is being prosecuted. So, DOJ or whoever puts prosecutors who are used to prosecuting white-collar crime. Like, they're not used to prosecuting necessarily trafficking cases. They are focused on the crime. It's usually money laundering, bank fraud, and those sort of things.

When the focus is on that, then through the process the victim actually—the survivor bubbles up. The real story bubbles up. At that point, they're looking at two different things. That's what's really a huge problem. The affirmative defense is so critical, and that's what it really establishes from the outset as part of it.

Mr. FRY. To be clear, most of our States—close to 50—have this at the State level?

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely. I think it was 40, it might be 49 now. I think one State just crossed that finish line. That is the biggest precedent that we have for this because there are more trafficking convictions that actually fall at the State level, and we've seen that for over 10 years.

We've seen that, actually, States that implement this—they are not overrun with cases, and additional to that, they've actually strengthened. As Sheri mentioned, a lot of States like Arizona—they have actually strengthened their laws over the years.

Mr. FRY. Right. This is obviously—so this legislation, it's non-partisan, obviously. Forty-nine States have it, approaching 50.

So, when you look at—obviously, it's provictim because it provides that affirmative defense, but it's also prop prosecution, right? This is why prosecutors and sheriff associations and—they love it, too, because—and why is that? Why do you think that they would want something of this magnitude?

Ms. BASHAM. It makes their job easier.

Mr. FRY. Correct. Because they're able at that point to go after the real culprits, right? The real individuals who are behind the trafficking victim and go after these rings.

Ms. BASHAM. Absolutely.

Mr. FRY. Thank you so much for your time.

Mr. Chair, with that, I yield back.

Mr. SWALWELL. Mr. Chair?

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you.

Mr. SWALWELL. I was going to say, if Mr.—I'm only probably going to take three minutes if you want two more of mine, Mr. Fry. Are you sure? OK.

Mr. BIGGS. I just have a couple UCs really quick.

OK. First, I would like to introduce into the record this image—we'll get you the hard copy—of Mr. Epstein, Ms. Maxwell, and President Clinton.

Also, I've got another article called "Schumer got thousands in donations from Jeffrey Epstein."

Without objection, those will be—and, Mr. Swalwell, your five minutes now.

Mr. SWALWELL. Thank you, Mr. Biggs.

Look, as we have trafficking victims testifying to us about really important issues, I think it's insulting to them to try and bring in politics right before I question them. We'll see whatever is on the Epstein list if the full list is released. I'm here to get serious things done, and so my line of questioning will not be absurd and in the spirit of what was just said.

Ms. Lopez, thank you for sharing your story as well. I was a prosecutor. I've had child sex-trafficking victims testify. It's one of the hardest things in the world to convince them to confront their attacker, their assailant, their trafficker in court, and more cases bleed out because you want them to avoid doing that. So, these monsters typically don't get the full sentence they deserve because you're trying to protect the victim from having to go through cross-examination and seeing that individual in court. Thank you for sharing that.

Ms. Bruggeman, could you share with us what would happen to organizations that help victims and provide support to victims and survivors of trafficking and exploitation if the temporary restraining order holding back this administration's order is lifted?

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. Which—the order on the halting of funds?

Mr. SWALWELL. Yes.

Ms. BRUGGEMAN. OK. Great.

Yes. Service providers depend on a variety of different sources of funding, and I think the witnesses have talked about the different sources that they are familiar with. It is a web of protection that is woven with Federal funds, private dollars, donations, and earned income that nonprofits around this country are working every day to ensure that they are able to provide consistent, reliable, dedicated services, and support.

When that is interrupted even for a week, for a month, the message to survivors is, We cannot be relied on. The day that you are able to find the time, the effort, the strength, the ability to escape your situation may be the day that our doors are closed, and once you do that, you may never be able to come out again.

So, if we allow our providers to close their doors, to go dark, we are inviting traffickers to walk in the door, to hold survivors captive, and we are telling survivors that we no longer care about your safety, we no longer care about your security, and we do not care whether or not you are able to ever escape your abuse and exploitation. We just can't let that happen.

Mr. SWALWELL. Thank you, Ms. Bruggeman.

I imagine all you know this, especially Ms. Lopez, but in my experience as a prosecutor I was trained in law school, and through the training that the district attorney's office provided to prove cases beyond a reasonable doubt.

Of course, you want to have compassionate people doing the job of criminal prosecution, but I could never have done my job unless I had outside organizations who were working with the victim in all of the life issues outside the legal issues that needed to be addressed when they are pulled away from the trafficker, and they need to reestablish their lives, get their confidence back, get their health back, receive the mental health services that they certainly need to get a career and if they have children. A prosecutor can't do that.

The only way to hold these monsters accountable who are trafficking them is for a prosecutor to have a victim who wants to be at least somewhat a part of the process. Your organizations help us bring accountability. Accountability puts the worst people away and prevents the next victim from being trafficked, but it also is a deterrent to someone who will see that you will pay if you do this to a victim.

So, again, to each of you, thank you for what you do in this cause. Our victims are worthy of your support, and I hope that we can see any funding that has been pulled to be restored immediately.

I yield back.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you.

For the record, Shared Hope International, Congresswoman Linda Smith, who is the architect of TVPA—and I'll introduce that. She is here today. Thank you for being here.

The fact sheet on "Combating Demand and Harmful Impact of Decriminalization of antitrafficking," also entered into the record. Without objection.

The Chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Florida, Ms. Lee, for five minutes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I, too, am a former prosecutor and served as the lead prosecutor on the Child Exploitation Task Force while I was at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Tampa. I have seen first-hand both the horrible crimes that are perpetrated against our country's most vulnerable children, and also how vital the work by Federal agents and others in investigating and prosecuting these cases truly is. As a Member of Congress, I am committed to ensuring that we do everything that we can to stop the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and to stop these predators.

Ms. Cooper, it has indeed been a pleasure and an honor to work with you and the Tim Tebow Foundation on the Renewed Hope Act. You mentioned earlier in your testimony that this bill is designed to provide resources and training and also requiring the Child Exploitation Investigations Unit at his field offices to hire an additional 200 computer forensic specialists and criminal analysts because these units are a dedicated team of investigators who can play a crucial role in combating human trafficking. I appreciate the

bipartisan support of many Members of this Committee and the Chair's leadership on this legislation.

You touched on something earlier, though, that we need to revisit, and that is, you said the words, "the right kind of Federal funding." So, clearly, the Renewed Hope Act to find these specialists and add to them, to supplement the team doing this important work, is indeed adding additional Federal employees of a certain type and specialty who can help rescue these children and stop these predators.

I am interested, Ms. Cooper, how much does the Tim Tebow Foundation receive in Federal funding?

Ms. COOPER. We do not receive any Federal funding at all.

Ms. LEE. How many victims has Operation HOPE identified?

Ms. COOPER. Tentatively identified 730 and safeguarded and rescued—I believe it's 289.

Ms. LEE. OK. It is important for this Committee hearing to note that your foundation is doing that kind of extraordinary work in partnership with Federal agents, but not by surviving on Federal funds. In fact, you have received no Federal funds to do the important work that you were doing to stop child exploitation.

Now, would you tell us, if we had those additional 200 agents at his, what do you believe we could accomplish?

Ms. COOPER. Yes, absolutely.

So, over 25 days, they have tentatively identified 730 of the 57,000 children that are waiting and languishing in abusive situations and hoping that someone is going to knock on that door. Imagine what we could do with 200 full-time investigators and victim identification specialists because, right now, Homeland Security is a global leader in this issue. They are the tip of the sphere. They are the most well-trained along with some of the analysts at Interpol and Europol.

We need to take that army of seven that's sitting over there at the Cyber Crime Center and we need to put it on blast, in the words of Senator Cornyn. That's why we need 200 investigators and analysts to ramp up that effort and get to those 56,000 remaining children that are waiting.

Ms. LEE. You also mentioned in your testimony the proliferation of CSAM materials and just how rapidly that material is increasing and growing, and I would like for you to touch on two things: (1) Why these Federal investigators or why this is important that it sits at his? (2) The urgency of us actually enacting this legislation, getting this done, and getting it signed into law?

Ms. COOPER. Yes, absolutely.

The reason why his plays sort of the most important role globally is because they have international jurisdiction, and the nature of Child Sexual Abuse Material is that it crosses both State and Federal and international lines. The offender who is raping their child in Ohio is going to share that image with someone overseas in a country, and they may share it with someone in a country that does not have good diplomatic relations with our country.

That's why HSI's partnership with Interpol and Europol is so important because not all countries want to share their data directly with the United States, and they need a neutral third party. That's

why Interpol's relationship in this ecosystem is absolutely vital to find those American children that are waiting to be rescued.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you. I thank the gentlelady for her work on this bill and other bills and legislation in this area. I appreciate it very much.

I appreciate all our witnesses being here today. We are not going to stop until we get this under control. Thank you for being here.

With that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:03 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

All materials submitted for the record by Members of the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance can be found at: <https://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=117951>.

