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Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee



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Survivor, Advocate, and Author of *Walking Prey*

To Human Traffickers, Runaway & Homeless Youth Are Walking Prey

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It is hard to think of a more despicable crime than the buying and selling of other human beings, especially children. Yet we know that it is happening right here in America, every day. Each year, thousands of children are bought and sold for sex. That should keep all of us awake at night.

Many of these young people are homeless or have run away and are fighting to survive on the streets. They are forgotten by society, but they are walking prey to traffickers. They are young and vulnerable. Thirty-nine percent of the homeless population is under the age of 18, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, and according to the National Network for Youth, the average age at which a teen first becomes homeless is 14.7 years old. The homeless youth population has more than doubled since 2007. Many are running away to escape physical and sexual abuse. Others have been ordered out of the home by parents who reject them. Still others have been lured away by adults who want to exploit them.

We must do all we can to hold traffickers responsible and to help survivors of trafficking rebuild their lives. But if we are serious about addressing this problem, we must also act to prevent this devastating crime from happening in the first place. And that means making sure that all our children have a safe place to sleep. As the Senate prepares to consider legislation to combat the scourge of human trafficking, Senators must support the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, S.262.

This bipartisan bill supports housing, education, and job training for homeless youth. It ensures that no child is turned away from services because of her or his sexual orientation or gender identity, and it offers training to service providers who are working on the front lines to protect homeless teens every day. It has earned broad support from advocates for trafficking victims and homeless youth, along with more than 25 Senators from both parties.

Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), who serve on the Judiciary Committee, are championing efforts to protect victims and hold traffickers accountable. So are Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), the longest serving woman in Congressional history, and Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine), the most senior Republican woman currently serving. Both of them recently testified before the Judiciary Committee about the importance of prevention.

Senator Collins told committee members: "Homeless youth need access to safe beds at night and services during the day so that they never have to choose between selling their bodies and a safe place to sleep." Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) also implored the Committee to focus on preventing more of our kids from becoming victims of human trafficking. They were joined on the Senate floor this week by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii), Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), who called for the Senate to take a comprehensive look at the issue of trafficking.

We couldn't agree more. Diverting kids from a lifetime of victimization will save lives and encourage the development of successful, productive young adults.

Jayne Bigelsen directs anti-trafficking initiatives at The Covenant House, which serves more than 56,000 young people in 27 cities. A 2013 study by the Covenant House in New York found that 1 in 4 homeless teens became a victim of sex trafficking or was forced to provide sex for survival needs, such as food or a place to sleep. Of these victims, about half reported that the number one reason they had been drawn into commercial sexual activity was because they did not have a safe place to sleep. As Jayne testified, "To prevent trafficking, we must understand the pipeline between homelessness and the commercial sexual exploitation of young people."

Holly understands this because she lived it. She was one of those runaway teens lured into sex trafficking. At the age of 14, she was sold by a man who pretended to care about her, and promised her a better life. This horrible trauma nearly destroyed her life, but now she is an advocate for others who have been trafficked. As she testified last week, "There needs to be more awareness in communities that this is happening in states all across the country."

As Holly knows from personal experience, and as Jayne knows from the front lines, homeless and runaway kids desperately need our help. Human traffickers view them as walking prey. Lawmakers, advocates, and survivors must stand together with the most vulnerable kids on the streets and protect them from being trafficked. We hope you will join us to urge Congress to pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act.