



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER
of suffolk county

**Testimony
of
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Support to End Exploitation Now (SEEN) Coalition**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Finance
Hearing on Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in America:
Child Welfare's Role in Prevention and Intervention**

Good morning Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to join you today.

I am Susan Goldfarb, executive director of the Children's Advocacy Center of Suffolk County, a Boston-based organization dedicated to healing and justice for child and teen victims of exploitation and abuse, and chair of the Support to End Exploitation Now (SEEN) Coalition.

As the director of the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) and as a professional working in the field of child abuse for more than 25 years, I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of child victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Across the United States, Children's Advocacy Centers provide a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response for child victims of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse. CAC's unite social workers, prosecutors, police, victim advocates, and medical & mental health professionals to ensure that child victims are afforded safety and services – and that the adults who hurt them are held accountable. But today, across the country child victims of commercial sexual exploitation are not afforded this crucial safety net or the benefits of this comprehensive approach.

An Effective Response to Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a crime of systemized brutality and sexual assault that is deliberately waged on children with prior histories of neglect, abuse, isolation and vulnerability.¹ Historically, these children have been labeled "child prostitutes", treated as criminals and, perhaps even worse, ignored altogether.

¹ From "The Life" to My Life: Sexually Exploited Children Reclaiming Their Futures / Suffolk County Massachusetts' Response to Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), Suzanne Piening, LICSW, PhD and Theodore Cross, PhD, May 2012

In Boston, a young woman's murder and a growing recognition of this invisible and underserved population spurred the creation of the Support to End Exploitation Now Coalition (SEEN), an initiative of the Children's Advocacy Center of Suffolk County, the Office of Suffolk County District Daniel F. Conley, and over 35 governmental and community-based organizations dedicated to providing effective, coordinated interventions for exploited youth and to improving the system's response to commercial sexual exploitation.

SEEN was created in to establish a collaborative and multidisciplinary response to commercial sexual exploitation that

1. empowers youth to leave their exploiter and utilize opportunities to regain control of their future,
2. ensures the physical and psychological safety of exploited youth,
3. ensures youths' access to resources and services,
4. enforces offender accountability by apprehending and prosecuting adults who exploit children, and
5. addresses the larger social issues impacting at-risk youth.

The SEEN model is clear in its assertion that commercial sexual exploitation is a form of child abuse – not delinquency - and that exploited youth are child victims. Thus, as with other forms of child abuse, youth-serving professionals have a legal responsibility to report commercial sexual exploitation to child protective services. This report of commercial sexual exploitation to child welfare has multiple implications: 1) It documents the exploitation and ensures that the abuse is not ignored, 2) it provides access to needed support and services, and 3) in Massachusetts, and many other states, it triggers an immediate referral to the district attorney and law enforcement for investigation and a coordinated, multi-agency response. In short, mandated reporting launches the safety net.

Child victims of commercial sexual exploitation have complex needs. The basic premise of the SEEN response model is that, in order to meet these needs, exploitation victims should have immediate access to and ongoing support from an array of providers including: child protective services, law enforcement, medical providers, legal advocates, youth workers, survivor mentors, and others, and that this early and collaborative response enhances evidence collection, improves coordination for multi-jurisdictional investigations, and is critical to providing an effective continuum of services. No single agency can do this work alone.

Collaboration, alone, is not enough. An effective response must also include: 1) training to increase awareness and knowledge about exploitation and its impact; 2) training to be able to identify victimized children and to know how to respond; and 3) development of clear, multidisciplinary protocols to ensure that all professionals not only report suspected exploitation but also work collaboratively across disciplines to ensure victim safety, provide services and hold adult exploiters accountable.

In my own community, these children were long invisible. In the 3 years preceding the

implementation of the SEEN model, we received a total of only 7 referrals regarding commercially sexually exploited children.

However, since SEEN was launched in 2005, hundreds of professionals have been trained, protocols have been established and more than 700 sexually exploited and high risk youth have been identified and referred (more than 100 per year in Suffolk County, alone).

In our community, exploited youth are invisible no more and we now know what we have long suspected: these children are among the most vulnerable:

- Approximately 65% have a history of running away;
- Upwards of 70% have a history of abuse and/or neglect and child welfare involvement; and
- Almost 60% of the children were 15 years old or *younger* at the time of referral;

Traffickers know and exploit this vulnerability. It is our responsibility both to prevent the exploitation and to intervene more effectively on behalf of trafficked youth.

The Critical Role of Child Welfare

So, how can we do this? Today's hearing is focused on child welfare's role in preventing and responding to sex trafficking. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is child abuse and I believe that child welfare agencies are and will continue to be at the center of preventing exploitation and responding to the needs of this population. In Boston, the Department of Children and Families has been a key partner and a leader in developing our multidisciplinary model and specialized services for exploited youth.

A growing number of other communities and a few states have made great gains in developing programs, instituting policies and changing statutes to recognize exploited youth as child victims and to begin to address their complex needs. Eleven states, including my own, have passed Safe Harbor legislation to ensure that exploited youth are treated as victims and have access to needed services.

This progress is hopeful, but it is not enough. Commercial sexual exploitation knows no jurisdictional boundaries. Children are victimized in every state and moved from state to state by their exploiters. It makes no sense that a child exploited in one city or state will be treated as a victim while a child in another community can still be arrested and blamed for his or her victimization.

Challenges and Opportunities:

1. Mandatory Reporting of Commercial Sexual Exploitation:

In the majority of states, commercial sexual exploitation continues to go unreported to child welfare. A few states have amended their child abuse reporting laws to include sexual exploitation as a "reportable condition" requiring professionals to contact child protective services when exploitation is suspected. Commercial sexual exploitation is child abuse and

should be reported, as such, in all states.

2. Lack of Data:

When commercial sexual exploitation is reported to child protective services, most child welfare databases classify the reports as sexual abuse or neglect; there is no category for allegations of commercial sexual exploitation. As a result, there is no mechanism or coding to collect data regarding the number of these cases or the services provided to these children.

3. Limitations to Child Welfare Serving All Exploited Children:

In most states, child welfare becomes involved only when an alleged offender is in a caretaking role. A pimp is not considered a caretaker – so the majority of exploitation reports are “screened out”. All exploited youth do not receive child welfare services. A few states have expanded the scope of their screening to include adult caretakers who have a child under his or her control. This change allows exploited youth – who have no familial caretaker in their life – to receive the support and services of child welfare.

4. Training and Development of Agency Protocols:

Child welfare agencies are already serving these children – whether the commercial sexual exploitation is recognized, or not. Agency-wide training is needed to ensure universal screening, victim identification, understanding of the exploited child’s experience and trauma-informed service planning. Policies are needed to ensure timely interagency communication and collaboration between child welfare, law enforcement and others when investigating and responding to concerns of exploitation.

5. Multidisciplinary Collaboration:

On average, each child victim of commercial sexual exploitation is involved with 3-4 agencies, including child welfare, juvenile justice, criminal justice, health care, family support and others. There is a critical need for consistency, communication and coordination across agencies and systems. All communities should establish interagency policies and procedures to ensure coordination among agencies. Children’s advocacy centers across the nation are experts in facilitating collaboration on behalf of abused children and are a ready resource to advance this work.

These are achievable changes. There is an astonishing level of public interest in sex trafficking of children and a growing body of knowledge regarding best practices. We have an opportunity to leverage this interest and expertise and make real changes that will, honestly, restore and save lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.