

United States Senate: Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Jeneé Littrell Testimony- “Falling Through the Cracks: The Challenges of Prevention and Identification in Child Trafficking and Private Re-homing”

Thank you Senator Hagan, Senator Enzi and the other members of the committee present today for the opportunity to speak. My name is Jeneé Littrell and I currently work as an assistant principal at an alternative school in Grossmont Union High School District. I have spent my entire career developing and implementing programs and services to address the social/emotional needs of students, especially, the most vulnerable and working to create policies, services and learning environments that support the physical and emotional safety of all students. For the past 6 years, much of my focus and attention—both personally and professionally has been focused on the issue of child sex trafficking and it is an honor to be here today to testify about the prevention and early identification work that we have done in Grossmont Union High School District.

Schools can and should be safe havens for students, and even more so for some whose lives are otherwise characterized by instability and lack of safety or security. In these cases, school personnel are uniquely well positioned to identify and report suspected abuse and connect students to services — actions that can prevent trafficking and even save lives. Everyone who is part of the school community — administrators, teachers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, food service staff, resource officers, and others — has the potential to be an advocate for child victims of human trafficking, but, *first*, they must learn the indicators of the crime, its warning signs, and how to respond when a student is an apparent victim.

Along with our partners-- law enforcement, child welfare and social services we have developed a program to accomplish the above task. Our program includes four key components:

- 1) increased staff awareness and education on the indicators and the nature of the crime; 2)

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increased parent and student awareness of the risks and realities of trafficking; 3) clearly articulated district policy and protocol for identifying a suspected victim or responding to a disclosure from a suspected victim; and 4) strong working partnerships with law enforcement, child welfare, probation and social service agencies.

In February, 2008, committed to the concept of an effective interagency information-sharing agreement that could transform how our district and partners serve families and students, we worked with Dr. Bernard James, Pepperdine law professor and nationally recognized expert in constitutional law and First Amendment rights, to guide the development of such a model. The document was signed by all relevant stake holders and within days the sharing of information across our systems, helped us to identify our first student victim of child sex trafficking. Since that time, our partnership has identified countless victims and survivors and educated and protected numerous potential victims. We have learned the magnitude and scope of the problem is greater than any one of our systems realized and it is definitely more challenging that any one system can address alone. We have also learned that schools play a critical role in protecting students and need the proper training and support in order to do so.

Beginning in the Fall of 2010, we developed a comprehensive staff training for all school personnel about the dynamics of child sex trafficking, the scope of the crime, warning signs, campus impact and a clearly defined course of action on how to respond. Along with our partners, we developed a protocol for response when a staff member confirms or suspects a student is a trafficking victim. We have trained our counselors on how to provide trauma specific services and when to bring in outside experts to support a student impacted by sex trafficking. We have also partnered with national and local experts to develop a prevention curriculum for

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students and parents. And, most importantly, we developed cross-system mechanisms and infrastructure for collaboration among public agencies and other stakeholders, while building upon the structures, processes, and relationships already in place.

In closing, I would like to share actual quotes from sex trafficking survivors when asked their opinion about how schools should address this issue.

- “I know that my teacher knew that something was wrong with me. On a few occasions she saw me getting out of my pimp’s car before school. I would catch her looking at me as if she was trying to figure out what to do with me. I WISH SHE HAD DONE SOMETHING!”
- “Watch it and address it!! We know you are aware it’s happening”
- “Educate all school staff about the warning signs. If I knew I had somewhere to turn, I would have done so.”
- “Don’t give up on us when we get in trouble. Work with us to figure out why things are happening”

Student victims need schools across the nation to be trained on identification and response. In many cases, the adults on campus are the last responsible adults to touch these young people’s lives before they are victimized or lost to this crime.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.