

Protecting Foster Youth from Sex Trafficking

Protecting foster youth must be a key component of state leaders' strategy for combating sex trafficking. Not only are these youth highly vulnerable to trafficking, but the state of Texas has a particular obligation after removing them from their dangerous homes and taking conservatorship of them. Next steps include better data tracking, expanded services for victims and youth at risk of trafficking, and improved training for teachers, law enforcement, CPS caseworkers, and others.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates 67 percent of likely child trafficking victims reported missing were either in foster care or a group home setting prior to running away.ⁱ This shocking statistic reflects the value we place on our most vulnerable children, those removed from their parents and subsequently placed in the child welfare system. Children removed from their families due to abuse or neglect, often young girls, run away from the state's official care and may become victims of child trafficking and sexual exploitation.ⁱⁱ Research shows that runaway children are at a high risk of falling victim to traffickers.ⁱⁱⁱ

As our state continues to look at ways to combat human trafficking, we must also do a better job at identifying, protecting, and supporting children and youth in foster care. There is little coordination between systems and too few solutions for the children caught between each system and this leads to real challenges. Additionally, youth emerging from one of the most traumatic experiences imaginable sometimes can't get the services they need. A 2012 report from Texas' Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force mentioned a range of barriers to accessing services for child trafficking victims.^{iv}



Recommendations

Improve the collection of human trafficking data on youth in foster care, including the number of foster youth entering the juvenile justice system as a result of sex trafficking.

We cannot effectively address and combat trafficking of these vulnerable youth without first having a strong understanding of the actual scope of the problem. DFPS does not collect information related to child trafficking.

Additionally, many minor victims of sex trafficking enter the juvenile justice system as a result of being on runaway, including youth in foster care who have left care and may be victims of commercial sex trafficking. To ensure child serving agencies have a comprehensive picture of how this crime impacts youth in foster care and opportunities for improvements, data elements related to minor sex trafficking and foster care status should be gathered by the child protection and juvenile justice system.

Expand specialized services for sex-trafficking victims and those at risk of sexual exploitation

Without additional services to provide identified victims, child serving agencies are not capable of responding effectively to the individual needs of victims. Texas is lacking comprehensive services for child trafficking victims

and expansion of appropriate services should be secured. Additionally, the types of services available to child victims may vary and should reflect best practices.

Cross systems training on victim identification and risk factors for human trafficking should be provided to medical professionals, juvenile justice staff, and the education community.

Often, foster youth and those on runaway come into contact with professionals outside of the child welfare system, including teachers, hospitals, law enforcement, and other local service providers. Given the likelihood of such contact, these professionals should have the tools needed to identify and assist victims, including basic training on human trafficking, reporting laws, and information on appropriate resources. These efforts will ensure children are more quickly identified and placed in a safe setting and matched with appropriate services and supports that will help them heal.

Develop training and indicators that direct delivery staff can use to identify victims of human trafficking and youth in foster care who may be at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking.

Caseworkers are rarely provided the skills and supports needed to identify children on their caseloads as victims of human trafficking. Training on this topic is not a part of the initial basic skills development training provided to newly hired CPS caseworkers, as required by federal standards and included as a topic for continued professional development. Given the vulnerable population of children being served in state child welfare systems and at risk for sexual exploitation, it is vital that direct delivery staff receive comprehensive training on human trafficking. Additionally, caseworkers should be equipped with user-friendly tools that allow them to effectively screen and assess children on their caseloads who may be at risk and/or victims of sex trafficking.

ⁱ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Available from, <http://blog.missingkids.com/post/56795201973/the-national-center-for-missing-exploited>

ⁱⁱ University of Texas at Austin, Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Center for Social Work Research, School of Social Work. October 2009. *Understanding Human Trafficking: Development of Typologies of Traffickers*. Noel Busch-Armendariz, Maura B. Nsonwu, Laurie Cook Heffron, Jacqueline Garza, and Mayra Hernandez, p.19-25. Retrieved September 10, 2012, from <http://www.utexas.edu/ssw/dl/files/cswr/institutes/idvsa/publications/humantrafficking.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. August 2009. *Human Trafficking Into and Within the United States: A Review of the Literature*. Heather J. Clawson and Lisa Goldblatt Grace, p. 5 and 10. Retrieved December 6, 2012, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/humantrafficking/litrev/#Other>.

^{iv} https://www.oag.state.tx.us/AG_Publications/pdfs/20121912_htr_fin_3.pdf