



**Testimony by Ms. Michelle Guymon  
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**Senate Committee on Finance**

**June 11, 2013**

**Hearing: “Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in America: Child Welfare’s  
Role in Prevention and Intervention”**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for raising awareness of child sex trafficking and exploitation in America. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Michelle Guymon and I am a Probation Director in Los Angeles County, the largest county in the nation. I have worked in LA County for nearly 25 years in our Probation Department.

Today, I would like to tell you about how I, as a member of the juvenile justice system, began working on this issue, and how probation is beginning to partner with child welfare to both prevent this crime and safeguard the survivors since so many children who fall victim to commercial sexual exploitation have had prior contact with the child welfare system.

In 2010, as part of my role in our Probation Department, I was serving on our County's Interagency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect. I was asked by a judge to be a part of a sub-committee on sex trafficking. While I had no idea why a probation officer, or our department, would be involved in human trafficking, I thought great – I love to travel – who wouldn't want to go to Thailand, Indonesia, or Cambodia?

Then came November 16, 2010. I remember the date so vividly because it was a day that changed my life. It was the first meeting of the Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking sub-committee. It was here that I learned that this exploitation wasn't something happening thousands of miles away in a foreign country. In fact, it was happening right here, in our community, to the very girls I was charged to protect.

The next few days were very difficult for me emotionally. I reflected on the many young girls who had crossed my path because they had been brought in on prostitution charges. Like many people within and outside the system, I had judged them. Countless times I had told girls, "There are better ways to make a living than selling your body. You should really have more respect for yourself."

What made it particularly difficult for me is that I have a Master's Degree in Social Work. I took pride in my ability to connect with young people, I felt I was a pretty good therapist, and I was working with some amazing young women who were overcoming significant childhood trauma. But I missed that this very trauma, the sexual abuse they experienced as little girls, was not a direct correlation to why they "chose" to sell their bodies, but was rather the very reason they were at such great risk for sexual exploitation.

How did I not make this connection? To be honest, I beat myself up for a long time, but realized that I can't change the past. From that day to this, my mantra has been and will be: When you know better you have to do better!

Over the past two years, we have worked hard to bring awareness to Los Angeles County, both outside and inside the system. One member of our Board of Supervisors,

Don Knabe, was integral in the launch of a public awareness campaign on our Metro system. The campaign highlights the growing problem of commercial sexual exploitation and asks citizens to be aware and to speak up if they see something. The flyers and billboards were placed on all buses, trains, station and bus stops – the places where girls are most vulnerable. The campaign expanded beyond the metro system and now, thanks to the private sector, we have over a hundred billboards throughout the County. We have created video messages and done countless media interviews because public awareness is critical. Until we as a society begin to shift our thinking from “teen prostitute” to “victim of sexual exploitation”, nothing will change for these young women.

Inside the system, training is paramount. Like me, so many others have made the same judgments about these young girls. We have trained over 2,500 people from various departments within the county, law enforcement, court system, faith-based community, community based organizations – anyone who may interface with young girls being exploited or who are vulnerable to exploitation.

This training on vulnerability is critical to the intersection of juvenile justice and child welfare. By the time girls see me, they have already been brought in for prostitution or a related offense. Since we know that most girls are first exploited between the ages of 11 and 14, and that we are arresting them later in their teens, they have endured years of violence and exploitation at the hands of their exploiters before we even identify them as victims.

We must, therefore, develop systems and protocols to identify these children earlier. Because so many exploited children have history in the child welfare system, that system provides an opportunity for prevention and early intervention efforts. However, child welfare has expressed challenges and barriers to serving CSEC, because these children have experienced childhoods wrought with extreme abuse and trauma. They require unique and specialized services that the child welfare system is not built, nor resourced, to effectively handle at this time.

In fact, our current system in California is not set up to address the issue. Youth who are commercially sexually exploited by someone other than a family member do not clearly fall under the child welfare codes, which largely address issues of familial abuse and neglect. As a result, reports to child protective services made on behalf of exploited youth may not elicit a response from child welfare. Consequently, until a youth is arrested, there may not be a formal response to known instances of severe exploitation and abuse even when the abuse has been reported by mandated reports or by a community member.

We must fix this. Studies show that virtually all exploited children have suffered extensive sexual, physical or emotional abuse and that the majority have had involvement with the child welfare system. Because of family dysfunction, many are in group homes or shelters, or they may have run away and are living on the streets. In fact, every 26 seconds, a child runs away in this country. She is running from something, not to something, making her particularly vulnerable.

A pimp or other exploiters prey on this vulnerability. One in three teens will be recruited by a pimp within 48 hours of leaving home and becoming homeless. He may pose as a boyfriend or parental figure, offering to provide her with food, clothes, shelter, security, even love. Later, after an emotional bond has been established, she is forced to engage in commercial sexual acts or face brutal physical violence.

Foster youth are extremely susceptible to exploitation due in part to their lack of attachment and their need to belong to someone. Unfortunately, when a young girl goes missing in the system, there is no one on TV pleading with the community to help find this lost child. She doesn't have a champion and her trafficker knows that. We must be that champion for her and the thousands of young girls who are victims of this horrific crime.

One young girl with whom I have worked grew up in the foster care system, was adopted, and then was sold by her adoptive mother to sustain her drug habit. She told me: "I remember the very first time my pimp told me that I would be going to a hotel to have sex with men. In the pit of my stomach I knew this didn't seem or feel right. I had a really bad feeling, but my need for love and to really belong to someone was more important. Because of my own sexual abuse as a child with different men, I already knew what having sex with men was about, so I went."

No one agency or system can adequately serve these victims alone. We need to ensure that mental health, probation, law enforcement, education, other health providers, and community based organizations are working together to bring resources to the table to serve these youth.

Right now we are faced with a major challenge: how do we identify, develop and implement a collaborative response to this growing problem – including clarifying jurisdictional issues, developing appropriate placements, training caregivers, social workers, and judicial officers, developing intervention services and after-care, employing a data collection mechanism, just to name a few.

It starts with a paradigm shift in how we see these girls. Your hearing today is evidence of this change happening. I would like to close in the words of a young victim/survivor we are working with now, who recently wrote about her experiences. She said:

"I would strive to change the law and how people view young people around the world that are being sold, bought and abused. This lifestyle is not a choice for many of us. Still, police officers look at us with disgust; it makes us feel ten times more pitiful. What we look like on the outside does not match what we feel on the inside.

Please remember there are hundreds, if not thousands of stories similar to mine. So let's help those in need, not judge and neglect us anymore. Show us that there is something better for us out there in this world. Give us the chance we never had. I will appreciate this more than you will ever know.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.