



March 5, 2013

Dear Chairman Rubin and members of the committee,

On behalf of Veronica's Voice and our clients, I am appearing in support of SB61, though with some important caveats. As our clients can attest, human trafficking happens every day in Kansas. This piece of legislation is a good first step in stopping human trafficking in Kansas. Passing this bill would show Kansas' commitment to end trafficking, empower victims, and prosecute traffickers. Our hope is that passing this law would cause Kansas to rally and continue to work towards a comprehensive approach and response to trafficking.

After running away from an abusive home when I was 12, I was trafficked as a prostitute for more than two decades. For years, I was brutally exploited and victimized, while the general public believed prostitution was glamorous or that women and girls chose it and should be arrested and treated as criminals. Despite missing out on proper education and experiences of a normal childhood, I managed to extricate myself from the sex industry. My own success has made me an inspiration as I reach back to help others still trapped. In 2000 I founded Veronica's Voice, naming the organization in honor of my murdered prostituted friend, Veronica Neverdusky. I met Veronica when she was only 14 and being prostituted, I was 25 at this time and still trapped, although a renegade. Sadly trafficking of underage youth was still viewed as criminal "just prostitution" and human and sex trafficking was a futuristic term to come, that would start the paradigm shift in how "some prostitution" is categorized. We still have a long way to go in understanding this very old, yet complex issue. In the words of CATW's Executive Director Norma Ramos "If we are to stand a chance at ending sex trafficking, we must deepen our understanding of the end point of sex trafficking, which is prostitution. Those of us who reject the notion that prostitution is sex work (when did human sexuality become work anyway?) and see it as an end result of some of the worst social conditions possible (sexual abuse in childhood, poverty, gender inequality, racism) must fashion remedies that address those conditions. Rather than make social injustice more tolerable, we must work to end it — in our lifetime and forever."

As a survivor, with the longevity of my experience, it provides an in-depth understanding of "the life" itself and the complex traumas related to commercial sexual exploitation. My passion and knowledge motivates me to advocate for the systematic changes that reverse the focus of criminalization of the victims and to create services specifically for them, both youth and adults, while bringing awareness to the DEMAND for commercial sex, which is the proper focus for law enforcement. In Veronica's Voice last fiscal year we have received 402 crisis calls; had 188 new client intake; placed 60 women in emergency shelter; distributed 343 Outreach Bags; had 14 Graduates of Unhooked; served 187 clients through our commercial sexual exploitation recovery program; we also provided 545 basic human needs services through our walk in services and filled service gaps such as transportation for clients when bus lines are insufficient or other community resources cannot help; since implementation of youth specific programming in April 2012 to June 2012, we served 16 youth. We have done this with only 4 staff on a shoestring budget. Yet only had 23 participants in our John School which is our restorative justice program OAR (Offenders Accountably Re-education) that addresses the demand side.

The current law has many flaws that this bill successfully addresses. There is currently very little state funding for victims of trafficking, this bill would create an important victim assistance fund that would be funded completely out of enforcing the law against those abusing and exploiting victims. This same fund also provides continued training to law enforcement on improving their response to trafficking.

The Voice for the Sexually Exploited

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The current law treats johns and pimps, who are the ones fueling the problem, relatively lightly. This bill would increase penalties and also greatly increase the fines, which go directly to helping victims. We hope that as Kansas officers start enforcing these laws that they will come to realize that the adults in these cases are often the child victims of yesterday, and that Kansas will declare this act to be both violence against women and call it commercial sexual exploitation. Both the current law and the new bill continues to fine those caught in a cycle of exploitation who will pay their fines through prostitution. We would rather see those charged with selling sex be given opportunities to go through a diversion process and also expunge their previous convictions.

This new bill also is the first step in the start of a system for underage victims. The current law potentially places a runaway in a county juvenile-detention facility for up to 180 days. A secure shelter facility proposed by the new bill would guarantee that these children would go through a child protective services system as opposed to juvenile detention. We expect that these provisions will have to be revisited and redefined as the system is tested

The new law also provides for underage victims the ability to have an affirmative defense against being persecuted for crimes while they were victims. This is a good provision, but it could be better by assuming that a child cannot sell sex and is in fact immune from prosecution.

Again, this is a good bill that we ask the members of the committee to pass. We also ask that this not be the last time that Kansas takes up this issue. The law can continue to be improved until Kansas has a fully comprehensive system in place.

Thank you for your time and attention to this injustice.

From the front lines,

Kristy Childs
Veronica's Voice
Founder, Executive Director