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Prioritizing Healthy Child Development Could Prevent Child Prostitution

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Research tells us that children who are raised in environments with limited adverse experiences are more likely to grow up to be healthy, productive adults than those with negative childhood experiences, such as abuse and neglect. Unfortunately, some children are denied the chance to flourish. The CHILDREN AT RISK documentaries “Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking” and “International Human Trafficking” draw attention to the dire consequences of our failure as a society to ensure that all children are raised with healthy experiences in safe and loving environments.

It is our collective responsibility to put policies and services into place to prevent child prostitution from happening in the first place, while also providing treatment and care for the victims of prostitution.

As Dr. Bob Sanborn, President and CEO of CHILDREN AT RISK, notes, “No teenage girl wants to be a teenage prostitute.” So how does it happen? The documentaries offer a number of lessons about the risk factors that can serve as precursors to a child’s entry into prostitution. In domestic cases, child prostitutes are often girls who have run away from homes that are physically and/or sexually violent. Ensuring that all children are raised in healthy, nurturing environments has the potential to drastically reduce the number of children who enter into prostitution. At present, our nation does not have a comprehensive strategy to make this a reality.

Policymakers must demonstrate that children truly are a priority by developing a shared national vision for children, and implementing a comprehensive inter-agency and inter-disciplinary national strategy for children. Within the context of this national strategy, federal and state policies and funding must be directed towards:

- 1) Ensuring that all adults know that child sexual abuse, including child prostitution, is a crime that causes severe damage to children, and that children can never consent to sexual activity;
- 2) Eliminating any tolerance for the sexual exploitation of children, through public education campaigns that encourage society to recognize that child sexual abuse, including child prostitution, is every adult’s responsibility, **not that of the child**, to ensure the child’s well-being;
- 3) Increasing parents’ and other caregivers’ knowledge of protective measures they can take on behalf of their children;
- 4) Addressing key risk factors for abuse through quality substance abuse treatment services, domestic violence programs, and mental health services;
- 5) Ensuring that all families are able to meet the basic needs of their children through safe housing, quality health care, quality child and

respite care, financial security, and access to nutritional programs; and,

- 6) Widely implementing evidence-based services to prevent abuse and neglect, such as early childhood home visiting and child sexual abuse prevention services.

While increasing our focus on prevention is of paramount importance, we must also more effectively address how our system responds to the children who are brought into prostitution. Children who enter into prostitution are victims of our society's failure to nurture them and protect them from harm. Arrests and criminal procedures should be a last resort, not the first step.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse exploits and degrades children and causes serious damage to their emotional and physical health, putting them at risk for long-term serious health consequences and shortened life expectancies. In the two documentaries, Bob Sanborn, President and CEO of CHILDREN AT RISK, identifies the United States as the number one country in the world for human trafficking, an appalling fact that most Americans would likely find surprising. Domestically, 100,000 to 300,000 children of the average age of twelve are brought into prostitution, often by adults who offer initial false promises of shelter, stability, and love. Internationally, victims are often lured to the United States with the promise of work, only to be forced into prostitution.

Child sexual abuse, including child prostitution, occurs in all populations. It happens to children in all socioeconomic and educational levels, across all racial and cultural groups, and in rural, suburban, and urban areas. As Texas Children's Health Plan Medical Director Angelo Giardino, M.D., Ph.D., notes in *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, "Human trafficking is all about people getting into a vulnerable position and then a criminal element in our society figuring out a way how to take advantage of that." As a society, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that no child is in this vulnerable position in the first place. We must embed the prevention of child prostitution into a broader vision for healthy child development, and encourage our national, state, and local policymakers to prioritize the development and implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for children.