

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON HOMELESSNESS

Thursday, November 9, 2023

Room 112-N

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Thank you, Mr. Committee Chair and Committee Members for the opportunity to speak today. First, I will state that I am not the expert on homelessness nor with human trafficking. However, I sit before you with over 20 years of experience in working with the sheltered and unsheltered homeless population, the incarcerated who reentered back into our community and with women who have been severely traumatized and attempting to find their way out of sex trafficking and exploitation. I come to you as a lighthouse and voice for those who are often silenced or invisible in their attempt to navigate in and out of seemingly foreign systems.

I am currently the Program Director for Project 2 Restore, a faith-based 24/7 staffed restoration home. We serve women 18 years and over who are survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation. We are a rent-free home and through community collaborations, we are able provide low or no cost medical, dental and mental health services. Clothing, financial recovery, even haircuts are also provided through caring agencies. Each woman is given the opportunity to grow and heal at her own pace with an individually designed healing path as she navigates through the Stabilization, Growth and Independence phases of the program. Project 2 Restore provides strengths-based trauma informed care, individual and group counseling as well as therapies focused on trauma, art, music, gardening, pet and equine. Education and career training is also available along with classes to build life skills, healthy socialization, financial recovery, learning self-care through exercise, relationships, boundaries, faith, mentorship and more. Our home provides a trauma-centered environment that allows women to experience a sense of felt-safety to begin the path of healing and to explore who they truly are and were created to be.

There are hundreds of beds and similar programs around the country. Within Kansas there are less than 10 homes much like ours with an estimate of only 30 beds available for the entire State. The US Department, Trafficking In Persons Report also define human trafficking as “modern day slavery”. It refers to a crime where traffickers exploit and profit at the expense of adults or children by compelling them to perform labor or engage in commercial sex. When a person younger than 18 is used to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime regardless of whether there is any force, fraud or coercion involved.

Exploitation and sex trafficking is a silent crime whereas victims often suffer within because of tremendous fear. We find many reasons for an individual landing in a trafficking situation, but there's always that 1 common characteristic called "vulnerability". Adults and children become prey when vulnerable, it's what recruiters and traffickers thrive on and pose using fraudulent stories or situations. We are seeing an increase of familial trafficking; where a supposedly trusted family member takes advantage of an innocent child who is thrown into the bowels of sex trafficking by those who should be a protector rather than a perpetrator.

Sex trafficking robs our women of their dignity which results in deep-seated shame. When familial trafficking occurs, the pain, loss of a real family, betrayal and trust often takes years to overcome at best. It's a lifetime sentence of the soul and heart.

I think of Mary (not her real name) who arrived 4 years ago at the doors of the Topeka Rescue Mission. Mary spoke quietly as she told her story of long-time physical abuse and then ultimate betrayal of internet sex trafficking. "Does this stuff really happen?" she stated. Her eyes then asked, "Do you believe me?" Mary, struggled as a victim of childhood sexual abuse from a family member and clergy of her church. She came from a large family with cultural beliefs stored as "secrets and don't tell". As an advocate for sex trafficking survivors, we walked out painful years of alcoholism, beatings and betrayal from multiple abusers with the belief "he's a nice guy when sober, he takes care of me". We walked out multiple stays at the Mission (planned for safety with the hope of sobriety) but she couldn't leave the alcohol or her painful memories. Because her abuser often knew where she was staying, he lured her back into his viciousness with the promise of "it'll be different this time, I'll take care of you" as he shared alcohol and drugs to aid having control over her. We walked out jail time for domestic abuse and public intoxication. We walked out trauma and crisis stays at the local mental health facility and detox center, then found it was the same location where everyone including her traffickers went. We walked out living in tents, where she was often alone and unsafe for a young woman attempting to survive on the riverbank with nowhere else to go. She reached out for help and found many kind souls to assist. The Mission sent outreach staff with clean socks, warm blankets, and food at the right time of near starvation, yet they faithfully came without judgement. The healing prayers of hope continued.

It had been 4 years of a rollercoaster of so many trying to help her, with dead end results. As much as I loved this young woman who had an amazing potential and intelligence, I began to feel a resolve that she may never make it out and I would eventually be notified she had died at the hands of her abuser. It was just a few weeks later, when I received a call from a local hospital and Mary shared that she had been badly beaten, all her ID was lost and wasn't sure what to do. On my drive, I prayed "Lord, could this be the last time and is she finally ready to get help?" Upon arrival, I gently asked if she was ready to get out of this life and as much as she could speak, said "Yes".

Our journey began and we immediately contacted Rescue America, a national sex trafficking hotline who literally rescues those wanting out of this life. In collaboration, Rescue America contacted a national airline and ubered Mary to the airport without ID and left Topeka for a safe stabilization program out of state. From there, Mary found a long-term (2 year) faith-based program and again was flown to another state without ID to her place of healing. A new journey began and as of last week, Mary is sober, strong, attending therapy, life skill classes, seeking faith and making plans for a life she thought she would never have.

I share this story as it's not unusual. It is dysfunctional and harmful relationships that took Mary and so many others like her that lead to homelessness and destruction. However, it takes positive healing relationships to help someone rebuild their life. It's understanding the "WHY-behind what happened to you?". How does trauma affect an individual's clarity and emotional stability? It takes time, patience, safe mental health and medical resources and willing individuals to walk alongside them. Through a housing program, Mary moved from a tent to an apartment. However, she moved in without furniture, blankets and food and no support to obtain the necessary resources.

None of Mary's journey to healing could have happened without a community, available resources, and advocacy. She is forever grateful.

I leave you with several thoughts:

- Vulnerabilities: It's every survivor.
- Trauma: PTSD- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder- serious and complex
- Advocacy: Resources with supports are a must
- Mental Health: Affordable and available
- Housing: A must with supportive resources
- Community: Lead with compassion