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Human Trafficking Victims Testify at Missouri House Committee Hearing

February 10, 2011, JEFFERSON CITY, MO — After being taken from her home in Illinois at age 13, Margaret Howard was sold to a Cape Girardeau, Mo., pimp who drugged her, held her against her will for five days and raped her repeatedly. She was later found and taken to a juvenile detention center in St. Louis, where her parents picked her up, but not until years later was she able to tell her story for the first time.

Howard told her story again Wednesday to the Crime Prevention and Public Safety Committee of the Missouri House to remind them that victims of human trafficking are just that, victims.

“Kids (who are trafficked) are seen as prostitutes and criminals,” she said.

Howard was one of two victims of human trafficking who addressed the committee.

Kristy Childs, the other victim, left her Missouri home at age 12 to escape an abusive situation, and truck drivers trafficked her across the country, exchanging food and transportation for sex. She wound up in Denver, under the control of a pimp.

Childs stayed under that control for years and finally got out of prostitution when she was in her 30s.

The survivors shared their story to help the committee realize the extent of human trafficking and to show their support for House Bill 214, which would amend Missouri’s current law regarding human trafficking by expanding the definition of human trafficking and by demanding stricter penalties for those convicted of human trafficking.

The bill would also provide a defense in court for human trafficking victims, allow victims to bring a civil suit against convicted traffickers, and allow the attorney general to bring a civil action against anyone who benefits financially from a trafficking enterprise. The bill’s sponsor is Rep. Anne Zerr (R-St. Charles).

In addition to the Missouri Catholic Conference, other supporters of the bill came to testify. Deb Hume, co-chair of the Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition, shared that 18,000 to 20,000 children are brought into the U.S. every year for trafficking.

Hume also said that the Department of Justice estimates that there are as many as 300,000 young women

(runaways, etc.) in the U.S. who are at risk of being trafficked for sex.

Hume also said that currently, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Missouri has prosecuted 41 trafficking cases, more than any other district in the U.S.

No witnesses testified against the bill. The committee expects to vote on the bill next week.

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