

Domestic Child Sex Trafficking and the Child Welfare Response

[music]

Kurt Volker: Welcome to the McCain Institute. The McCain Institute was founded to honor the legacy of service to our nation of Senator and Mrs. McCain and the McCain family, going back generations. That legacy is about humanitarian action and work. It's about human rights. It's about national security and above all about leadership, character-driven, values-driven leadership.

That is what we seek to promote at the McCain Institute. We try to make sure that we always position ourselves as a do tank. We try to be an organization that is focused on action more than being a think tank and proposing ideas. The simple way to think of it is rather than coming up with things that we want to recommend that other people do, we ask ourselves the question "What can we do?"

That is the spirit in which we've launched our work in combating human trafficking. With tremendous leadership in partnership with Mrs. Cindy McCain, who is the chairperson of our Advisory Council on Human Trafficking -- I see at least a few others connected to that council here today -- we have been able to raise public awareness.

We have been able to promote original research. We have been able to see stronger legislation passed in the state of Arizona. We've contributed towards legislation in other states in the Mountain West. We've developed partnerships with law enforcement. We've promoted training for law enforcement and social services.

We have worked with other NGOs that either are experts in human trafficking, like Polaris -- they run the national hotline -- or, alternatively, those who have been involved in development of technology, such as Thorn...

Where we worked together to produce a spotlight software that helps law enforcement sift through all the massive information on the Internet to categorize and standardize, make it easier to look for patterns that might indicate human trafficking on the Web.

These are just some examples of the things that we have done to try to play a very active, hands-on role in fighting this terrible, terrible phenomenon that still exists throughout our country and throughout the world today.

Today's discussion is part of our Conversation Series and part of our awareness-raising. The focus, particularly today, is child sex trafficking, the victimization of children and its connection to the child welfare system. How does the child welfare system deal with that? Does it create conditions that are conducive to this? Can we turn that around and make sure that we are actually using it as a tool for helping children?

With that, I'm going to turn the microphone over to Mrs. Cindy McCain to introduce our moderator, and we'll get the conversation started. Thank you again so much for coming. Mrs. McCain.

[applause]

Cindy McCain: Thank you very much for coming. I love to see a packed room and people standing. I'm sorry we don't have chairs for all of you, but that's a good thing today. I really am excited about this.

First of all, thank you for coming. For obvious reasons, this is a terribly important issue. When I watched my own state's child welfare system collapse, it was made very abundantly clear to me that we had to get involved in this issue in a major way, as it relates to trafficking.

We have managed to compile today a group of experts on this issue, people that have experienced it, have worked in it, have lived it, every aspect of it, and are here to not only exchange ideas and discussion, but also to hear from all of you.

Our moderator today is Malika Saada Saar, as you know. She needs no introduction. She is one of the more amazing women on this issue that I have ever had the opportunity to know. I'm grateful I can call you my friend. Thank you. Welcome. Enjoy. I hope this is a good learning experience for everybody, and I hope we can do more of these soon. Thanks for coming.

[applause]

Malika Saada Saar: Hi, everyone. It's really a blessing to be with you today. Thank you for coming. We are going to do introductions of the panel and then really start to unpackage the issue of the intersection between child trafficking and child welfare.

What's important about today's conversation is that what distinguishes the experience of children trafficked in this country is their interaction with the child welfare system. We know so many of our children who are bought and sold here are also coming out of foster care.

We will look into that more deeply. I'm so blessed and honored to be on the panel with the individuals here. Starting with Congresswoman Bass, if you can introduce yourself and then go down the panel...

Congresswoman Congresswoman Bass: Sure. Congresswoman Bass. I am serving in my third term in Congress. I come from Los Angeles. I represent a community in LA. LA's so big, we have actually 12 representatives in the region, in just LA County. I have been involved and concerned about this issue for many, many years.

Barbara Amaya: Hello. I'm Barbara Amaya. I am a Senior Technical Advisor at a local nonprofit, SeraphimGLOBAL. I'm also an author, an advocate, and a survivor of human trafficking.

Allison Green: My name is Allison Green. I'm a Supervising Attorney at DC's Childrens Law Center. We are attorneys who represent the best interests of children in the foster care system, in our local system.

Malika: Let's get started. Congresswoman Bass, I want to start with you. A couple years ago, my organization, the Human Rights Project for Girls recognized that we had to get the child welfare leaders in this town to understand how our children are being trafficked and how many of those children are coming out of foster care.

There were very few voices and champions on that issue of the intersection between child welfare and child trafficking. The first voice, the most powerful voice was Congresswoman Bass.

Congresswoman, if you can just talk about it in terms of coming out of LA, understanding the lives of our vulnerable children as deeply as you do, what brought you, really as one of the first voices, to shine the light on this intersection between child welfare can child trafficking.

Congresswoman Bass: When I learned about it, I was absolutely horrified. What happened was in LA there was a story in the local paper about how there was a big arrest of girls and also...I don't like to use the work Johns, because to me they're child molesters. It was traffickers and girls.

The FBI had formed this taskforce called Innocence Lost. I went and I met with them. They did a presentation for me, and they talked about the girls. It was just my instinct that said, "I bet a lot of these girls are foster girls."

They really didn't have documentation for it, but they said they guessed it was around 40 percent, and I assumed it was much more. Then you start piecing it together and you know that a lot of times when the girls are perceived as having run away, what happens to them?

It was so bad in LA that literally there's a web page on the website for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services of missing kids. They don't know where all the kids are. Some of them they know were taken by their birth parents, but some of them they don't know. Then when kids run away from the system, if they're not found, that's kind of it.

It just horrified me. Then in LA, we also have the intersection. I know this is in other places, but not necessarily everywhere. We have the intersection of gangs who are involved in trafficking, street gangs, who have diversified their criminal activity away from just drug trafficking and now trafficking girls. It was just horrific that something like this could go on.

I do have to mention Malika that the irony is I sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee. Yesterday, we were doing the TIP report, the Trafficking in Persons Report. We're so worried about everybody around the world. A couple of years ago when I sat for that

report, I'm like, "Well, where's our section." [laughs] We need to hold ourselves accountable.

[applause]

Allison: That's what I say.

Malika: I want to follow up on that, because we look at what happens in other parts of the world with children being trafficked. In this country, there is not only the reality of the ways in which the brokenness of our child welfare system can make our girls more vulnerable to being bought and sold.

Often when we look at our child welfare-involved children who are being trafficked, many of them, if not most of them, are girls who have been put in more than one placement. The shared narrative is girls who have been put in multiple placements in care, and often run away from care because of that.

There's this other reality, the other system that they interface with, which is the juvenile justice system, how we see the criminalization of our girls and boys, but mostly our girls, 1,000 children every year who are arrested for prostitution, even though most of them are not of age to consent.

We know that there's a racial dynamic here, where 59 percent of those children arrested for prostitution are African American. As someone who just sat in that committee room yesterday, could you also talk about the distinction of not only the added vulnerability of our children who are bought and sold in foster care, the disappeared often of the foster care system, but also criminalized.

Congresswoman Bass: To me, when I first began to realize this, the idea of even using that term -- the girl is not old enough to consent for sex, yet she's called a prostitute -- made absolutely no sense at all.

We do know that a lot of the girls are arrested, and they're arrested for a variety of things. They're arrested for prostitution, but they also might be arrested for other petty crimes related to that, related to drug addiction, or related to their behavior.

The idea that you see a child...and that's really to me a cry for help. When a child is acting out like that poor girl in...where was that, where they tackled her?

Allison: South Carolina.

Congresswoman Bass: Yeah, South Carolina. If her parent had come in and done that in the room, the parent would have been arrested. What I learned about South Carolina is that they criminalized adolescence. In school in South Carolina, and apparently a number of the southern states, if you misbehave, it's actually a crime. They've made it a misdemeanor.

In other places, if you misbehave, you might get detention, but you get arrested. There's all of these entry points into the criminal justice system, and then we know that once the

girls are in the system, that's also a recruitment place, where other girls might recruit. There's so many places where our girls can fall down the rabbit hole, and then it's a question of how you bring them out again.

Malika: Barbara, you are a survivor. You have the lived experience at another point in time when children were trafficked in this country, not in the same numbers, not the same issues of vulnerability. If you could just give voice to how you have come to the issue and come to understand what this generation of children who are being bought and sold need.

Barbara: I know there is, of course, the added element today of the Internet, and that's added a whole other aspect. When I was a young child, I ran away from my home the summer I turned 12, and I continued to run away from my home. I think like not all, but so many other victims, I was being abused in my home, so I ran away.

I was in the juvenile justice system and I was committed to the state. I was sent to detention centers, reform schools, and other schools, and I fell down that rabbit hole because I was misidentified and I wasn't identified at all as child in need of services. I was labeled incorrigible and uncontrollable. I didn't even know what that word meant at the time.

I kept going through these different systems and not once was it ever addressed what was happening to me. Why was I running away from this suburban Fairfax, Virginia home to...DC was in flames at the time. It wasn't a good place for a 12-year-old to run away to. I fell into the hands of human traffickers, and for the next 10 years I ended up in New York, and I was trafficked there.

Once again, I was criminalized in the system, and I'd been programmed to say I was 18 or I was 21, and give fake name and false addresses. I was criminalized and got a criminal record that I've since been able to go back and vacate.

Some of the tactics are the same. Traffickers found a model that works, how to turn a child into a commodity. Today, of course, the added element of the Internet has just made it all worse. A lot of the misidentification is still happening. Just like it happened then, it's still happening today.

Malika: What was true then and is certainly true now is that we have created this false distinction between raping a child and paying to rape a child. In the case of the latter, there's impunity for the buyer, and there's also the criminalization of the victim. You were and kids today are in a situation where, by virtue of being a child...

Barbara: A child. Remember that.

Malika: ...and a victim of what essentially is commercial, serial rape, both of those conditions ought to be protected conditions -- child, victim. Yet neither were contemplated then or are contemplated now, to the degree that we should see when our youth, when our children are being subject to this form of commercial rape.

Barbara: It's rape. You can't say "Child prostitute," and you can't say that John -- I can't stand that word -- was having sex with a child. No, he wasn't. He was raping the child. Yet, I was 12, 13, 14, 15 getting a criminal record, being arrested for loitering for the purpose of prostitution, whatever it was in Manhattan, and the adult male was being sent home with nothing, no charge.

Malika: Allison, I want to go to you. We find ourselves in this dual space when we talk about child welfare and child trafficking. Part of what we do as an advocacy community is to say, "This is not a criminal justice issue. We should not be criminalizing our children for being subject to commercial rape."

We argue, "This about child protection. This is really for the child welfare system to be able to help our kids, because these children are, in fact, abused and neglected children."

There's also the reality that many of us know that many of the children are the runaways from group homes, those who have disappeared from foster care. In many ways, how they have been trafficked, or that they have been trafficked, is often the manifestation of the brokenness in the child welfare system.

If you could just speak to that on one hand we want this to be contemplated not as a juvenile justice, but as a child welfare situation, and at the same time, we know the very real ways in which child welfare has actually rendered our kids more vulnerable because of placement in group homes, because of multiple placements.

If you could just speak to that and from the DC perspective.

Allison: It's a really difficult tension. As an advocate, it's a difficult tension because to get services and safety for a child client, they effectively need to be an a public system.

We don't have a public system that I have found that is made for sexually exploited youth, because they don't fit in any of the boxes we already have. It does not make sense to put them in the juvenile system, and there's a reluctance to do that, because it's harmful. It's doubly traumatic.

It likewise often doesn't make sense to put them in the child welfare system, especially in cases where their parent has not been complicit. We have seen families where a parent has to essentially plead to neglect in order to get services for their child, even though they have not been willing this to happen.

It's very difficult to try to take incredibly complex cases and fit them in a box. We see the same thing, you were talking about this, where frankly whichever system you touch first is how the trajectory of your case and your life goes at that point. It's really up to chance.

You can have the same child who may come in as a status offender, which is what we call a runaway youth, and who is treated from a punitive perspective. A young woman may be shackled. She may be detained. She's brought in because she's truant from school or running way, even though that's only a symptom of the behavior.

We'll deal with that in a juvenile court on the first level of DC Superior Court. However, if her John is picked up and prosecuted, then upstairs he's tried, and she's brought in as a victim-witness, and she's protected much more, but she's not getting any services up there.

The duality of that, it almost blows one mind that in the same day you can be going from a courtroom downstairs where she's treated as a criminal, and then go upstairs where she's treated as a victim, and it really depends on what you get.

Malika: Although, that's progress, because in most situations when a child testifies against her trafficker, she's treated as one criminal testifying against another criminal, so...

[crosstalk]

Malika: ...glad to hear that you have some form of protection happening in DC. Congresswoman Bass, I know you wanted to respond to this.

Congresswoman Bass: Yeah, I did, because one of the problems -- and this is just the craziness of some of our systems. In the child welfare system, we define child abuse and child neglect as by a parent.

So, if it's by a trafficker, then that doesn't fit within our thinking of the system, which means we need to change the system. One of the things about legislation, frankly, that's frustrating is that you can get legislation passed.

But unless you do the work to make sure that people know it's passed, it doesn't really mean anything. We did get a Bill passed, the Strengthening Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act.

This Bill basically says that states and county child welfare departments are supposed to develop protection plans that outline provisions and procedures to identify and assess all children known or suspected to be victims of trafficking.

But here's the problem. All the systems are overburdened. We had this fight in California where the child welfare system was like, "Oh, no. Please don't give us anymore kids." It's like, "You know what? I'm sorry. We've got to figure out how to expand the system. That's just not acceptable."

On one end, it might be to fight for the implementation of that, and I wonder if there's a way to do that. Another part of the Bill provides for grants for states and counties to begin to do the training that they need to do.

It's not enough just to say, "Child welfare system, now you deal with it." You've got to train the social workers so they know how to identify. Then you also have to provide...There needs to be a continuum.

One of the biggest problems is where do you take the child if the police aren't arresting et cetera. But the social workers have to be trained, law enforcement have to be trained. But there is, supposedly, grants to do that now, so I wonder if there's ways to...?

Barbara: Yeah, the data piece is so important, because there's no good data on...

[crosstalk]

Barbara: ...the exact numbers in our country for a variety of reasons. One, there's inherent under-reporting, because of denial, because some young women have experienced what's called traumatic bonding with the perpetrator, so they're trying to protect.

Also, because of the inherent nature of the crime, it goes across the boundaries, especially here in the DC area. We're so uniquely situated. You could get on the metro in Virginia and be in three different jurisdictions within an half an hour.

These data systems don't talk across state lines.

Congresswoman Bass: They don't talk.

Barbara: So we don't have good data. That's a problem from a policy perspective, but it's really a problem as an on-the-ground case handler, because data is what informs funding and funding is what helps get placements and services for my clients.

Malika: I just want to lift up though this change we now have in federal law where last September, President Obama, signed into law, the Strengthening Family's Act, preventing child trafficking.

Part of that law requires now child welfare agencies to assess and identify for child trafficking. This is the first time now child welfare agencies are being required to identify and assess for children who are being trafficked.

We are still waiting for ACF to come out with the proper assessment tools...

Congresswoman Bass: There you go.

Malika: ...to give to child welfare agencies to do that type of assessment. But we do have an opportunity to finally start looking at the numbers, which I think is important in terms of getting at proper data.

Allison: I guess I would ask you, before the assessment tools in our...can you argue that? Instead of that parent going, "I have to plead," or whatever, are you able to use the law?

In other words, to make the child welfare system in DC respond to the girls?

Allison: The child welfare system in DC, like many other states, takes the position that they intervene in parental child abuse and parental child neglect.

Congresswoman Bass: Correct.

Barbara: If a perpetrator is not a parent or caregiver...

Allison: Right. But that's what the law was supposed to have changed.

Barbara: Right. [laughs] What it has now changed is our local definition of abuse and neglect. From their perspective, although some advocates may disagree, they cannot prove a case of abuse of neglect because of the statutory language.

What we are seeing is there is a movement to start complying with the Strengthening of Families and Friends Against Sex Trafficking Act.

Did I put my mic off.

Malika: It goes on and off.

Allison: It's going in and out. I'm sorry.

Barbara: I think we will have better data two or three years from now, because now we're starting the process of collecting it, but it's going to take time...

[crosstalk]

Congresswoman Bass: ...to work.

Barbara: It's going to take time to actually start the collection process, start the report back, and then get the funding that comes from that.

Congresswoman Bass: That is always a problem.

Malika I think, Congresswoman Bass, to your...

[crosstalk]

Malika: But we're seeing this across the country...

[crosstalk]

Malika: ...our organization is getting calls from different child welfare agencies, asking about, "How do we do this assessment, because we don't know proper ways of identifying children who are being bought."

But then your piece of legislation was part of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. What was so powerful and transformational about it is that it recognizes child trafficking as a form of abuse and neglect.

That was based on how, in most states, including the district, if you think you're see a child being bought and sold, and you call up the child welfare hotline, they tell you to hang up and call law enforcement.

If we're trying to end the criminalization of children for trafficking, it doesn't help that child welfare tells you to call law enforcement. Florida was an example of where they train their child welfare workers to recognize and identify trafficking as a form of abuse and neglect.

We have the challenge now, given that your law has passed, had we make it a reality across the states, across the child welfare agencies to understand it's their problem, too.

Congresswoman Bass: That's why when you pass a law, you have to have the organizing and the advocacy to fight for the enforcement of the law. Because to say that it's going to take two or three years to find data for a social worker to then be able to identify whether a kid is trafficked is problematic.

[crosstalk]

Malika: It is, and it must also be more problematic because DC just passed the law saying that they're moving away from arresting children to putting children...

Congresswoman Bass: Safe Harbor.

Malika: ...in safe spaces, public health spaces. So, if you don't have child welfare engaged, it makes that shift all the more hard.

Congresswoman Bass: But to me, it still seems like an advocacy issue.

Malika: Indeed. That's right. I want to surface another advocacy issue in...we're talking about this is the challenge of we pass really good law, and now we have to see proper implementation at the state and local level.

But there's something else here around child welfare that hasn't been looked at, that I want to talk about more. Which is that I have really seen this issue as what is uncovering, unearthing so much of what's not working in child welfare.

The first time I understood how in danger our girls were was an event that we did of girls who have been trafficked, as well as had been put in the juvenile justice system.

They were talking to a group of law makers. I asked them to choose on their own how they wanted to begin their narrative of being bought and sold. It was about 14 girls who were in the room. They were in a fishbowl, and all the law makers and stoppers were on the outside.

Every single girl, on her own, decided to start the story of being trafficked with the story of how she was abused in care. The girls shared how they were abused in care by an uncle, a friend of the family, another child.

They did not disclose the abuse, because they were either afraid of being removed to a group home, or they were afraid of being removed from the home, away from the sibling. So, if they were taken out of the home, that would leave their brother or sister to be abused.

Part of it made me understand, "How do we deal with this issue of children being abused in care, and having the supports to be able to give voice to that," because I found it remarkable that every single girl started her story of being trafficked with the story of being abused in care, and too afraid and unsupported to disclose.

Barbara: By virtue of being in care, these are used for who came in because of abuse or neglect. So abuse may feel normative to them. That might be a pattern that they're used to, so do experience.

Again, in a foster home, the inclination is not to report or to run, because that's just how things have gone. That just might feel how they will continue to go. The system is often not the safe haven that it strives to be, because basic needs aren't being met. It's very difficult.

To go back to what we were saying earlier about the runaway issues, many youth, even those who are not being exploited, run away. Runaways are a hallmark foster youth behavior.

We have youths who frequently run back to their biological parents, for example. We call them runaways, but they really may be at a friend's house for the weekend where they're not supposed to be.

There's a large population of foster youths who are not...they stay out overnight, but they don't worry that the agency. So, running, which is a really important red flag for sexual exploitation no longer becomes alarming to the agency.

One of our jobs, as advocates, is to lift up those cases, to say, "This is different. This is a youth you really need to start looking for, and looking for now, because she's in danger." Even being gone for 24 hours.

"This isn't a youth who's just visiting her mom for the weekend, and the court doesn't want her to be there. This is different and we need good investigators looking, and looking urgently."

Malika: When we did the testimony around the Strengthening Family's Act, Tee, who is a survivor, said, "Nobody puts out an amber alert when we go missing."

Congresswoman Bass: I was just thinking about that. If anybody in here, if your kid didn't come home for 24 hours, what would you do? You would be a wreck. How that's even normalized, [laughs] you know what I mean, to say that it's OK.

Tee also said that she feels that the child welfare system prepared her to be trafficked.

Malika: Definitely.

Congresswoman Bass: Because they moved her around from place to place, and everybody that was involved with her was paid, so she saw herself as a commodity. She made money for people.

It was devastating when she said that. I never forgot that. It just made me feel the weight of the responsibility to address this issue.

Malika: Barbara, did you want to add anything.

Barbara: I was just saying, I say that all the time, that it was training ground. The early child abuse, and then the next abuse becomes normalized because it had already happened.

Then you're in the system, and people are being paid to take care of you. So, when you're being programmed by a trafficker, and further turned into a commodity, it's not so unusual, because you're used to that happening in your life from an early age.

So, it's definitely a training ground for traffickers.

Malika: I do want to make sure that folks in the room know that now, because of Strengthening Families Act becoming law, that foster care placements, group homes, individual homes, are required to report a child missing from care because of T's testimony, and the idea that we have to be concerned when our kids in care go missing, that that is a red flag that must be taken seriously.

Barbara: Finally.

Congresswoman Bass: It's really about normalizing this. To me, and I always say this whenever I talk about this issue, is when you think of foster youth, they're just like your own kids. If your kids are missing for four hours, you'd have a fit.

We have to stop looking at them differently. If we have a frame of our own kids, and whatever our own kids need then foster kids need, then it's a whole different way to approach the issue.

Malika: That's right. I want to ask folks, because I know we have created a dismal picture of foster care. I also want to think about and talk about what can we do.

We have had these very significant reforms in the last almost two years, so the fact that we've got significant reforms in two years is a big deal, to improve child welfare's response to our children who are trafficked.

It's clear that there is a challenge, already, around implementation, but what else can we think about, in terms of reforming child welfare to be more responsive as we move forward, so that we don't see this kind of added vulnerability for our children who are under our care, essentially?

Barbara: Everybody talks about collaboration and everybody talks about working with others. I don't know exactly how to make that happen and how hard data is to collect. Data -- how do you do that well?

I don't have an answer to that, but I wish I did. We all know it needs to be looked at further. I don't know how to address that. I wish I did.

Malika: Allison, as someone on the ground who...?

Allison: One thing that I'm looking towards and hoping for is better therapeutic services to help young men and especially young women who are experiencing this, because even where you have been properly identified, they are often referred for kind of a typical therapy service.

Talk therapy is very useful for a lot of people, but there's many different types of different modalities, and sexual exploitation is different because of this operative psychology where the youth may not believe herself to have a problem to bring a therapist or may not have change she wants to make.

We think a lot about the stages of change model where there's pre-contemplation and then contemplation. She may not be [inaudible 35:17] situated to another foster youth who wants to go talk about her past trauma history.

I would like to see the development of service providers who have more expertise in figuring out what really are the evidence-based practices in how to intervene and what programs work. Is it a survivor-led program? Is it someone with a background in domestic violence?

There's a lot of parallels between the cycles of domestic violence and the cycles of child sexual exploitation. Is it someone who really understands trauma?

I would put more information and then more resources about really tailored services that help, so that we're not just checking the box and saying, "OK, this youth has a therapist." I want them to have the right one.

Malika: Yeah, that's so important.

Congresswoman Bass: I really think that there needs to be a large-scale movement in our country where families and kids that are involved in the system are at the center of it, and not just the people that are the "Experts," because I happen to think that the best public policy is made when people who are the most effected are at the center of designing the policy.

You can pass all these laws based on your ideas, but a lot of times we pass laws that are contradictory and were so well-intentioned. Laws that were passed years ago that said that we didn't want kids to languish in foster care, and so we gave a time period or the person's parental rights were terminated.

If the mom is incarcerated or if the mom is in treatment and she relapse and time runs out, and then she loses her kids. The kid's feeling like, "Wow! My mom. The time ran out and my mom can't take care of me anymore. Now I'm shuttled off to somebody else."

That was an extremely well-intentioned law, but again, I think if people are at the forefront of the law and then once the law is passed the forefront of the implementation. What's very clear to me is that we have to fight for implementation, because people and

systems are not going to just look at TV and go, "Oh, they changed the law. Let's stop everything we're doing and do something differently."

They have to be pushed and forced. That's what I would like to see happen in our country.

At the same time, if you build a broad-based movement like that, that movement can also help to change public awareness, raise public awareness. Again, kids are viewed as kids and not as something else.

Malika: That's exactly right. I also want to raise up this issue of trauma-informed care for our kids. Many of you in the room have been part of conversations where we've talked about how do we make a child welfare system that is trauma-informed.

The kids who are being exploited, not only are they in desperate need of trauma-informed care, as you've talked about, Allison, but there is also, there is the need to deal with the preexisting abuse that you had spoken to, and how that hurts a child so deeply.

Then there is the reality of the commercial rape that has happened to the child repeatedly, and then there's the reality of being rendered property. A lot of times, in terms of care for our kids who are exploited, there are a lot of good, meaningful efforts like doing yoga, or making jewelry, and that's all good, but we need a standard of care that is trauma-informed, because our kids who are being hurt, who are being bought and sold, carry such intense injury, and it's not enough to simply do yoga or make a necklace.

They deserve comprehensive care and attention.

Barbara: Long-term.

Malika: And long-term, thank you.

Barbara: Not six months.

Malika: Exactly.

Barbara: Or two weeks. Seriously? It needs to be a little bit longer.

Malika: Exactly.

[crosstalk]

Malika: I want to go and open to the audience to hear what people's questions are for the panel. I see one back there.

We have someone back there.

Audience Member 1: Thank you. I recently have become involved with Mission 14, addressing sexual exploitation of children. As I'm sitting here, I'm looking at base cause is child molesters.

If we brought public awareness more to the perpetrators, and went after them, stopped smacking them on the hands...We changed the public's view on smoking. Back in the day, we would all be sitting here smoking.

Now you're a criminal, almost, if you smoke. Why don't we get public perception and laws changed so that the perpetrators are treated as such?

Congresswoman Bass: That's what I was referring to when I said a broad-based movement, because you need to change social norms. We've watched that. We're in the middle of changing all kinds of social norms right now.

LGBT issues. Just think about it, a few years ago. But I can think of, in my lifetime, alcohol, tobacco, domestic violence, where certain behaviors are rendered unacceptable by society.

To me, it is unacceptable to live in the world's richest country and we can't figure out how to take care of half a million kids. There are 350 million people in this country, so this is about 500,000 kids who are in and out of our child welfare system in a given year.

That, to me, should be our standard. It should be unacceptable. If you think about the fact that when you're talking about kids in the child welfare system, they are under the government control. The government is the parent, and then the government becomes abusive.

Allison: I just want to add that, because this is a big thing for me, which is that we have to go after demand. The anti-trafficking community and our lawmakers have been very purposeful about the traffickers, and we should, because they are certainly culpable.

There has been almost complete impunity for the buyers. When buyers are arrested, if they are arrested, and they are rarely arrested, it is for solicitation. It is for a misdemeanor.

But what they do, in any other context, would be construed as statutory rape. We have all the laws on the books that we need to go after buyers, but we don't use them. We don't arrest buyers for statutory rape, sexual assault of a minor, child endangerment.

We do not do that. The FBI did a major sting two weeks ago where they talked about the number of girls and boys who were rescued, and the traffickers arrested. Not one buyer was arrested in that FBI sting.

It's not about a lack of law. We have all the law we need now, at the federal and state level, to go after buyers for serious federal offenses, for serious felonies, and yet it's not being used, because the behavior has been normalized.

As a human rights lawyer, I would say anytime you have a culture of impunity, that protects the violence. We are protecting the violence against our kids.

Malika: I promised this individual back here.

Lori Handrahan: Thank you for one the most honest discussions I've ever heard in Washington, DC, on child trafficking. Congratulations on a great panel.

My name is Lori Handrahan. I'm starting an organization called data4justice.org. Rosie O'Donnell has just agreed to be on our advisory board, and the Sundance Institute is interested in doing a documentary on my research.

My question is, you mentioned perpetrators, you mentioned the racial element and you mentioned a lack of data. A couple of things that weren't brought up that I would like to raise, and then ask a question, more than 85 percent of all the men in this country who are arrested for child porn are elite white men.

If more than 85 percent of black men or Muslim men were being arrested for child rape, there had be an outcry. The media never mentions this. It's up on my website.

It's almost always under three. It's brutal infant and child rape, and according to Europol, America houses more than half of the servers in the world that are distributing child porn.

Malika: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

Lori: We know where those are. We don't shut that down. It's been reported on the UK media. The US media has not reported on it.

[background conversations]

Lori: My question is, about child welfare, I'm looking for an investigator to help. In the state of Maine, a senior child protection worker named Cynthia Wellman came forward and she said senior child protection workers are trafficking children with University of Maine professors.

She was forced out of her job. She is now bankrupt. She sued the state. The judge threw it out, and nobody has even opened an investigation.

We know child protection staff are involved in exploiting these children and in producing porn, and I'm hoping that you guys can address that issue. Thank you.

Malika: I want to address that. We don't have stats that demonstrate that. I do think that it's important that we don't demonize child welfare or one group of folks in child welfare.

The majority of child welfare workers -- my mother was a child welfare worker -- are hardworking folks who do this work because they want the best for children. I am not interested in engaging in the demonization of a whole entity.

As in any space, whether we're talking about child welfare, juvenile justice, our schools, you always have bad actors, and we have to be able to call out those bad actors when they go against what the purpose of their jobs and the expectations of the community are to protect our kids.

Any child-serving system, you must believe that people who engage in that child-serving system want the best for kids, and when there are those bad actors, we'd be able to hold them accountable.

I don't know if anybody else wants to...

Congresswoman Bass: I agree.

Allison: I can say I am paid to complain about the child welfare system. That's my job is truly to be vigilant and to look at these cases closely and to report to the court when there are missteps.

I have never seen or supervised a case with a worker or that's come to anybody's attention, and I'm not saying that it doesn't happen, but it's certainly not a trend.

Barbara: I agree with what you just said. In every group there's going to be some bad apples.

Malika: Absolutely. Go ahead.

[crosstalk]

Cindy: ...unilateral here. I apologize.

Anna Dillon: Hello. OK, now I will be the one. It's on.

My name is Anna Dillon, and I work for the Church of Scientology National Affairs Office. Our group, together with many other faith-based and non-faith-based nonprofits, we were part of the coalition that's doing whatever we could to help support the legislation that recently passed on human trafficking.

I'm just wondering how can civil society help at the next step? Good, we passed the legislation. What's next?

Us and other groups we work with on human trafficking issues, we are all equally concerned about these limitations. The panel is excellent. I just want to thank you all. It's fantastic data, but we can see that there is further difficulties, even when the laws are passed.

What's next? How can we implement them? What can we do, as a civil society? How can we collaborate with you? What else can we do in Congress? Just would like to have your opinions on that.

Congresswoman Bass: There's an organization that I work with. Inside of Congress, there's a congressional caucus on foster youth. Outside of Congress there's another organization called the National Foster Youth Institute, and one of its main goals is to really create that broad-based movement -- to have activists in every single congressional district -- because there's kids in the system in every single congressional district.

Individual counties and states need to be held accountable. I would contact my county to say, "This law was passed. What are you doing to prepare your system to train your workers so that they can screen folks?"

Granted, there's further implementation that needs to take place with assessment tools and all that, but there's no reason to sit and say, "I'm going to wait two or three years."

Allison: Until someone brings it to me.

Congresswoman Bass: Exactly, "Until somebody brings it to me." You can have your social workers ask a few questions. Maybe they won't be tested and all that, but a few questions can get you to it.

Systems around the country have to be prepared to deal with this population. That was the point of the law.

Allison: I would say encourage your members to become foster parents and to open up their doors. One of the main issues we see in these cases is the lack of placement options.

These youth really oftentimes need to be moved to a different neighborhood or to a different school district for safety reasons, but we're constricted because there's just not enough open homes. We're operating in very narrow margins.

What we really need is more foster homes and programs that have beds available so that we can have options, have a large spectrum of options available, so that youth can go there. If Eve needs to be in a single-parent female-headed household because that's what's best for her, that's great.

If Eve needs to be in a dual-parent household for more supervision, so we have options to choose from, and we can really make recommendations that are in the youths' best interests. Encourage your members to think about becoming foster parents.

Audience Member 2: I may be wrong, but my understanding is that years and years ago, before Stonewall, if the Blaze raided a gay bar, the patrons' names ended up in the newspaper, and people lost jobs, and their families got broken up.

Why can't we put the names of the buyers in the newspapers in Washington, DC.

Malika: Let me just quickly respond to that, although I'm not sure you want to replicate Stonewall tactics.

That still keeps it in the space of vice and prostitution, and it's not vice and prostitution. It is child abuse, and so the same way we handle other situations of child abuse, which is through the law, we should do that here.

We don't need to do anything but arrest and prosecute for statutory rape, sexual assault of a minor, child endangerment. Once you start doing that, you will see the ways in which demand are not as present, and the popularity of websites like Backpage will not continue.

The reason why Backpage or any other platform is so popular is because there is impunity there. There is not fear of being caught, arrested for purchasing a child. I don't think we need to do anything else, other than apply the law to these situations of child sexual abuse.

Congresswoman Bass: I would just add one thing. It might be good to have them be very high profile cases, like with any other criminal case. If that's really lifted up and explored in the media through that lens.

Malika: We have time for one more question. I can't choose who it is, so whoever has the microphone, I'll ask you.

I am, I'm sorry. I'm taking liberty to choose.

Jasmine Hoffman: Hello, I'm Jasmine Hoffman from the University of Maryland. I'm just going to ask. What are some efforts that can be made on a smaller, local level that you would believe to be the most effective?

When it comes to human trafficking, many people just divide themselves into two groups. One set of people are, "Well, this is a huge national issue that I'm not necessarily connected to, so let the policy makers and the NGOs deal with it," and the second group of people are people like many of you here; the policy makers and the NGOs who are involved in making overarching policies and laws to help combat this issue.

Really, how do you suggest we get the other people involved at the lowest level origin? If we're trying to change the social narrative, what can a regular individual do if they're not necessarily viewing it, and even if they are, what are we supposed to do?

We already rely on a lot of different forms of human trafficking in our daily lives, such as buying products from slave labor across the country. How are we really supposed to deal with our national trafficking if we already have a social narrative that already justifies all the other forms of it?

Malika: Thank you for your question. Why don't we each take a stab at that?

Barbara: I'm not even going to start on that one.

Allison: That's a great question, and we could be here for another hour discussing it. I would say, in the smallest form to push back on some of the cultural elements that have crept in that have made this OK in our media. I don't need to name specific movies or TV shows. One of the most famous songs of the summer really glorifies sex trafficking.

Malika: Don't go there. [laughs] Music.

Allison: In the everyday interactions with friends, family, other students...

Malika: What's wrong with that? Let's see what it is.

Allison: It's called "Trap Queen." [laughs]

Malika: OK, Trap Queen?

Allison: Yeah.

Barbara: What? Trap Queen?

[laughter]

Barbara: Moving along.

Malika: I've never heard of that one, but I've heard of a lot of others with pimp and hoe.

Allison: I would say in your everyday interactions when you encounter these things or there's memes on the Internet, people make jokes out of them...

Malika: Halloween costumes.

Allison: I think it's important to stop the conversation there and pause...

Barbara: Halloween costumes?

[crosstalk]

Allison: ...and cause people to reflect and say this isn't something to joke about. This isn't something to make light of.

[crosstalk]

Allison: To start, in a very small way, by having maybe an uncomfortable conversation and telling someone, "You know, this isn't something we should really pay money to see.

Congresswoman Bass: On that note, I remember when my adult daughter came home from middle school and said, "I need a costume. We're having a pimp and hoe party at school."

I went, "What?" Because I hadn't self-identified as a victim at that point. Nobody knew my story. I was horrified. Normalizing, we need to stop at that very root level. This is a school function.

Barbara: I don't think I need...

Congresswoman Bass: I don't know, OK.

Malika: I would say a couple things, though. You can join the National Foster Youth Institute. One of the wonderful things of social media, you can be active on social media in your network and spread awareness.

You can become a CASA, a Court Appointed Special Advocate, because there's a terrible need for that. One issue is to talk about kids that are currently trafficked. The other issue is to prevent other kids from being trafficked, so volunteering as a CASA. You

mentioned becoming a foster parent. There's a tremendous need. I think there's multiple ways that people can get involved.

Barbara: Mentoring.

Malika: Mentoring, yeah.

Allison: I'm going to add one and then wrap up. In the last five years major media outlets have used the term "Child prostitute" 5,000 times. We have a Change.org petition asking the AP, which is really the standard bearer of language in major media outlets to drop the term "Child prostitute" because there is no such thing.

I would each of you -- we have 93,000 signatures right now -- to go to Change.org No Such Thing and sign the No Such Thing petition urging the AP to drop the term "Child prostitute." There is no such thing. There are only survivors and victims of child rape. Excuse me.

[applause]

Malika: I want to thank you all. I'm sorry for the difficulties with the microphones. Thank you so much for being here and being part of this conversation.

[applause]

Kurt: Please, join me also. Malika, you did a fabulous job moderating this, so thank you. Thank all of you for coming. Thank you, Mrs. McCain, for your being with us today as well. Please go forth and stay connected to us with the McCain Institute, and please keep up this fight. Thank you.

[applause]

[music]