



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER
of suffolk county

**MA Attorney General's Hearing on Sexual Exploitation Online
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Testimony
Of**

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Attorney General Coakley, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing and to discuss domestic minor sex trafficking and sexual exploitation online.

I am speaking today as the executive director of the Children's Advocacy Center of Suffolk County (a Boston-based organization working closely with the Office of Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel F. Conley) dedicated to healing and justice for child and teen victims of exploitation and abuse, and on behalf of the Support to End Exploitation Now (SEEN) Coalition.

As the director of the Children's Advocacy Center and as a professional working in the field of child abuse for almost 25 years, I cannot overstate the importance of speaking out – publicly and loudly - on behalf of victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about CSEC here in Greater Boston and throughout Massachusetts.

As you know, Children's Advocacy Centers provide a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response for child victims of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse. CACs unite social workers, prosecutors, police, victim advocates, medical and mental health professionals to ensure that child victims are afforded safety and services – and that the adults who hurt them are held accountable. But today, across Massachusetts child victims of commercial sexual exploitation are not afforded this type of safety net or comprehensive approach.

The Support to End Exploitation Now Coalition (SEEN), an initiative of the Children's Advocacy Center of Suffolk County and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office is a partnership of over 35 government, state and community-based organizations dedicated to a collaborative response to youth exploited through prostitution.

Rooted in conversations begun in 2001 and formally established in 2005, SEEN has addressed commercial sexual exploitation of youth through the development of a comprehensive and innovative response model and formalized this commitment through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by 38 governmental and community-based agencies . The SEEN MOU summarizes SEEN’s approach and reads as follows:

The undersigned agencies are committed to affording youth who are exploited through prostitution the opportunity to feel supported and safe and to be protected from further abuse. This partnership strives to empower youth to make choices and regain control of their life by partnering with the youth in their own recovery. The undersigned are committed to always seeking the outcome that is in the best interest of the child. All partners support the implementation of a multidisciplinary protocol due to the shared belief that it is the best practice approach for providers serving youth exploited through prostitution (including child protection, law enforcement, youth outreach and advocacy, prosecutors, mental health and medical, and others) to communicate and collaborate in service planning and seeking offender accountability.

We are committed to participating in a collaborative and multidisciplinary response to youth exploited through prostitution that

1. empowers youth to leave their exploiter and utilize opportunities to regain control of their future,
2. ensures the physical and psychological safety of exploited youth,
3. ensures youths’ access to resources and services,
4. enforces offender accountability by apprehending and prosecuting adults who exploit children, and
5. addresses the larger social issues impacting at-risk youth.

The SEEN Guidelines (*“Responding to Youth Exploited through Prostitution: Guidelines for a Multidisciplinary Response”*) outline in detail the rationale and steps to implement a coordinated, comprehensive, multidisciplinary response to CSEC.

So, what does this mean for exploited youth in Suffolk County?

A safety net has been created:

With trauma and, sometimes, delinquency histories, exploited youth are often extensively “system involved” – receiving services from multiple agencies and providers.

Prior to the development of SEEN, providers in this system worked in isolation, did not have established mechanisms for communicating with one another nor did they have a sense that they were, collectively, effectively helping the child victim.

Most significantly, providers did not recognize commercial sexual exploitation as a form of child abuse and, consequently, were not fulfilling their mandatory reporting responsibilities to the

Department of Children and Families.

The SEEN model is clear in its assertion that CSEC is a form of child abuse – not delinquency - and that professionals and mandated reporters have a responsibility to report exploitation through the filing of a report of suspected abuse or neglect (51A) with DCF. This 51A documents the concern and results in an immediate referral to the district attorney and SEEN, which then triggers a coordinated, multidisciplinary team response.

A SEEN referral allows a multidisciplinary team to convene to comprehensively assess a child's needs including: placement/shelter, medical evaluation/health care, psychological treatment, investigative interview, interpersonal support and threats/dangerousness of alleged pimp/perpetrator.

The basic premise of the SEEN Guidelines and response is that exploitation victims should have immediate access and ongoing support from law enforcement, medical providers, child protection, legal advocacy, youth outreach, adult survivors, counselors, etc. and that this early and collaborative response enhances evidence collection efforts, improves coordination for multi-jurisdictional investigations, and is key to stabilizing victims and preventing the loss of evidence.

THE IMPACT OF A COORDINATED, MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESPONSE

Child exploitation victims are no longer invisible:

Prior to implementing the SEEN model, from 2001-2003, the child abuse unit of the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office received only 7 referrals regarding commercially sexually exploited children. These child victims were virtually invisible.

However, once SEEN was launched, from 2005 to October 2010, the number of sexually exploited and high risk youth identified by SEEN in Suffolk County reached close to 400.

- Approximately 70% of children referred have a history of running away.
- Upwards of 90% have a history of abuse and/or neglect (very similar to national statistics).
- Online exploitation – through Craigslist, MySpace, and social networking sites – is a common element across cases.

Exploited children are victims, not offenders or delinquents:

Exploited youth in Suffolk County are not treated as “prostitutes” or charged with sex for a fee. Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel F. Conley has publicly committed that his office will not revictimize these youth by treating them as criminals and that his office will not charge these children with “sex for a fee”.

New partnerships and new resources:

In Suffolk County, we are fortunate to have local, state and federal partners including the Boston Police Department's Human Trafficking Task Force, the Department of Children and Families, Department of Youth Services, the Youth Advocacy Department of CPCS, and others, as well as providers offering specialized programming and services for this population such as Roxbury Youthworks, My Life My Choice, and Germaine Lawrence.

These changes are significant and we are proud of our accomplishments to date.

But, consider the following as we look at where we were – and the work that remains to be done:

It was 2002 when the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) held a national summit entitled Protecting Our Children: Working Together To End Child Prostitution in Washington, DC.

At this Summit, exploitation survivors spoke of their experiences as children. Many spoke at that time in favor of substituting “**commercial sexual exploitation of children**” for the term “**child prostitution**” because the latter connotes criminal behavior and legal consent by children. A common theme throughout the summit was that the children involved should be viewed as victims, not as criminals. (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *OJJDP News @ a Glance*, January/February 2003, Volume II Number 1)

Looking at the headlines in local news then and now:

Boston Herald

May 13, 2002: Hub teen was trapped in life of prostitution; Teen tells story of hooker's life on the streets

The number of female runaways is increasing, and what we're seeing is that these young women are frequently the targets of exploitation,"...There's a whole customer base for underage women. These folks who run teen prostitution cater to johns who know specifically what they're getting."

October 14, 2010: “A woman...has been sentenced to two years in prison for trying to turn a 13-year old girl into a prostitute”.

Boston Globe

December 2003: For working girls, an innocence lost: Teen prostitutes find life risky and uncertain

October 10, 2010: People need to know what these guys have done. Federal prosecutors cracked the child prostitution ring, opening a window onto a sordid world.

The most recent Globe article, while intended to highlight the bravery of a young survivor, it still refers to her as a “young prostitute”.

Children are still called prostitutes and hookers. And, with this, they still carry the blame.

After almost ten years of bringing commercial sexual exploitation of youth into the public’s attention – and as recently as after the publication of the Globe article this month - I still regularly hear, “I didn’t know that happened to children here. I thought it only happened overseas.”

So, while I am proud to be able to describe the efforts of the SEEN Coalition and its partners in Suffolk County. And, I believe that we are making gains in aiding exploited youth, important work remains ahead:

1) Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Massachusetts must be recognized as child abuse and this recognition must be supported through policy and practice.

Mandated reporters across disciplines, across the Commonwealth must be trained to recognize suspected exploitation and to report it to the Department of Children and Families.

DCF statewide must, as they do in the Boston Region, screen these cases appropriately and refer them promptly to the district attorney’s office and police for investigation.

It’s possible: In January of 2010, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families implemented new policies to address its intake and the investigative response to human trafficking of children. This policy includes that exploitation investigations shall proceed jointly between the CPS Investigator and law enforcement. (CT Dept. of Children and Families Policy 31-10-6.1)

2) Child victims of exploitation across the Commonwealth should be treated as victims – not criminals.

Even as Suffolk County has taken the lead in treating these children as victims, this practice must be ensured by law. Massachusetts must decriminalize the act of prostitution by children – and strengthen its laws to hold offenders and johns accountable.

It’s possible: Safe Harbor Legislation has passed in New York, Connecticut and Illinois to divert child victims of commercial sexual exploitation to the child welfare system for placement in a setting equipped with specialized therapeutic services. This provides an opportunity to intervene in the cycle of violence and stops the criminalization of the child victim.

3) Child victims of exploitation must have access to appropriate shelter and services

When an exploited youth is identified, appropriate shelter and services are critical for protection and recovery – but these services either do not exist or in short supply. The lack of emergency shelter is a persistent problem that prevents effective intervention. Options are frequently limited to returning the child to his or her home – often an inappropriate option – or placing the victim in a runaway youth shelter or juvenile detention. Exploited youth deserve a safe, secure setting to afford protection and begin providing services.

4) All exploited youth in Massachusetts should have the benefit of a coordinated, multidisciplinary response.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children has no boundaries. It is, by its nature, multi-jurisdictional. It impacts children and youth from every community in the Commonwealth.

Leadership – across agencies and at the highest levels – across the Commonwealth must invest in creating a coordinated, multidisciplinary safety net for exploited youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.