

Good Afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Urban and members of the Select Committee on Children:

My name is Nicole von Oy and I am here in support of S.B. 153 "An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children." I want to thank you for calling this hearing on such an important issue.

For almost a year I had the privilege of working for the Paul & Lisa Program and facilitating a program called My Life, My Choice. In that program, I was working with girls in group homes and residential facilities educating them and giving them the tools they needed to keep themselves safe and recognize signs of sexual exploitation of children.

In a few of the homes I facilitated in, I came across girls who were willing to share their stories with me who at one point were involved in prostitution/human trafficking because they were looking for someone to love them; they were lured, coerced, or forced into it or put into it by their parents. These girls didn't want to be involved nor did they ever want to get in trouble if caught, although sometimes they wished they would get caught so they would be saved. Many times, girls are leery about running to the police because they are taught by their traffickers to fear the police; that the police will do nothing but hurt them and send them to jail. Often times, this fear is reinforced when they are arrested (by no fault of the police except doing their job) and put in detention centers which often times does nothing but continue to traumatize a girl and make them runaway from the facilities right back to the person that is exploiting them.

Victims of sexual exploitation are frequently processed as juvenile delinquents or adult prostitutes. Children who are arrested for prostitution are trained by their pimps to lie and will almost always have a rehearsed story to tell the authorities. Many times the girls are provided with an excellent false id resulting in their registration in the arrest records as an adult which could follow them for life until it is corrected by someone that recognizes they are a minor.

Those children who are identifiable as minors, may not be arrested for child prostitution per say, but often time are charged with a delinquent act either for prostitution related activities or for a related offense such as: loitering, being out past curfew, drug possession or habitual running away. Not every officer is consistent with which the way they make arrests. One officer may arrest for child prostitution while another may try to give a girl a "break" and charge her with a lesser offense. In any event, no matter what the girl is being arrested for, being arrested for something they have no control over is extremely shameful, degrading and humiliating and adds to the pain they are already being subjected to. These children deserve to be referred for services and given the help they need to live a meaningful and productive life. This will only begin to happen with this law and awareness of the issue. Through this public hearing, the law making process, and efforts of advocates and constituents, the "Safe Harbor" bill will effectively raise awareness amongst law enforcement, judicial officials, social service professionals and the general public that minors in prostitution are victims foremost who require treatment and care to prevent re-traumatization.

I would like to end my testimony with testimony from a young girl I met through my work at Paul & Lisa and a girl I continue to mentor. Through much help, courage and perseverance she has changed her life around and took advantage of an opportunity that was given to her to go to college to pursue her dream of becoming a social worker: