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*In 2001, a family member of mine, who was fifteen at the time, was recruited into prostitution. A young teenage girl that left us as an innocent child came back to us with a damaged soul. My family and I had never heard of commercial sexual exploitation. The thought of prostitution, never crossed our minds as it had never touched our lives. We learned very quickly, and it was heart wrenching.*

*A caring detective recognized her face from a missing poster while she was being processed for solicitation for prostitution and quickly contacted us. We were by her side within hours. When she came out of the room to greet us, I was overwhelmed at the change that I saw in her. I had seen her several weeks prior from the date that she went missing and I couldn't believe my eyes. She was gone for 33 days and she had aged, she looked different, as if something was not there, something was missing.*

*I learned quickly about prostitution and what the victimization was that these women and girls had to endure, however this did not prepare us in any way for what the experience would be in assisting her. Services were not available to her that would assist her in any way of getting the help she so desperately needed.*

*She left us as an innocent child and was returned to us with an extremely damaged mind, body, and spirit. We are a white middle-class family and we never imagined this could happen to us. Her battle to get out of this life continued for 8 more years.*

Well that was many years ago and I have been educated quite a bit more since then. The trauma, pain, hurt and degradation she suffered compelled me to find a way to educate communities about what our children are up against and how we can protect them. Us, the adults, the caregivers, have to be empowered with the knowledge of what to look for in our children, how to react and what steps to take if your child has been a victim. It is imperative to listen and be non-judgmental towards the child if this occurs. These children need specialized services available to them that must include mental health and trauma therapy. If gone untreated they become the women we have served over the past nine years in Hartford and Waterbury Community Court.

The Paul & Lisa Program believes that if emotional, physical and mental health problems are treated properly, this population has a real chance to redirect their lives and see themselves as valuable human beings rather than worthless objects.

Sexual and other physical violence is the normative experience for women who engage in prostitution. This has been clinically noted, and reported by others. "Violence from customers is aimed not only at punishment and control of women, but at establishing their worthlessness and invisibility" (Dworkin, 1997; Patterson, 1982). "The hatred and contempt is ultimately internalized by these women resulting in extremely long-lasting self-hatred and lack of self-respect" (Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1997; Hunter, 1994; MacKinnon, 1993). Many professionals who work with this population have not been trained to see that those who prostitute are marginalized human beings with a lack of resources, or to recognize and assess the unique factors that demand these women to receive understanding and care specialized to fit their overall physical, emotional and mental health needs.

I urge the Select Committee on Children to bring this bill to vote with the General Assembly. I highly recommend that the bill identifies these children as victims and requires these much needed comprehensive services be available for these children.

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