

Teresa Downing-Matibag, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Network Against Human Trafficking  
Ames, IA 50014

May 3, 2015

Dear Honorable Representatives:

On behalf of the Network Against Human Trafficking and its constituents, I am writing to request your support of SF497 and kindly ask that you read this letter in its entirety.

First, please note that according to Iowa and national law, young people under age 18 who are commercially sexually exploited are considered victims of sex trafficking, whether or not force, fraud, or coercion are involved.

*Victims of sex trafficking have legal rights which have consistently failed to be recognized by our law enforcement and justice systems in Iowa, largely due to ignorance regarding our laws, disagreement with our laws, and a serious lack of training regarding our laws and how to enforce them. To some extent, also, their rights have been disrespected due to a lack of will to identify prostituted youth as trafficking victims and to prosecute the mostly middle class men who purchase them.*

It is time for Iowa to become a national leader in ending this heinous crime, which is now being used by drug dealers, gangs, terrorist organizations, and domestic and transnational criminal syndicates to fuel some of the world's gravest crimes against humanity. These crimes are not limited to the violence perpetrated against youth, but also include human trafficking-funded atrocities committed by Islamic terrorists. ISIS, for example, has recently bragged about selling women and girls into sexual slavery to fund its activities. Furthermore, U.S. gangs, including gangs in Iowa, are increasingly relying on sex trafficking to fund their activities.

It is clearly not in the best interest of our great state and its citizens to assume a "boys will be boys" attitude toward trafficked young persons of any age. I propose, rather, that we begin taking our laws seriously, implement a statewide campaign to warn men that purchasing sex is a crime, and fully fund our efforts to combat this crime – beginning with passing SF497. Once we pass SF497, we can use a limited amount of funding to educate the men of Iowa that purchasing sex from a trafficking victim is a felony offense, and then provide much needed training and resources to law enforcement and justice professionals to identify and prosecute it as such.

Addressing DEMAND is central to ending human trafficking in our state, as an aggressive prosecutorial effort will communicate to traffickers and buyers that it is not safe to exploit Iowa's youth. Addressing DEMAND is also central to the rescue of trafficked youth, as our law enforcement and justice systems will be empowered to identify victims and bring them to safety.

I have been told that a significant minority of our state leaders believe that law enforcement does not need to be trained to identify human trafficking, because not all of them will encounter this crime; and that others believe there is no need for state expenditures for such training. I propose, rather, that the extent that all law enforcement are trained is predictive of the number of lives we will save; the degree to which we will reduce the profitability of this crime; and our capacity to fund our efforts by forcing traffickers to forfeit their profits.

Please allow me to introduce the facts regarding the vulnerability of Iowa's youth to trafficking victimization:

- **Over 10,030 Iowa youth experience homelessness every year, according to the National Center for Family Homelessness (2012)** ([http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/report\\_cards/long/ia\\_long.pdf](http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/report_cards/long/ia_long.pdf)).

- Homeless youth are at high risk of trafficking victimization: A 2015 study published by the Congressional Research Service found that 28% of street youth and 10% of homeless youth in shelters are trafficked by adults demanding sexual acts from them in exchange for survival provisions. Such “survival sex” is a form of human trafficking, according to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.
  - Youth trafficked through survival sex are also at considerable risk of being enslaved for profit by their initial abusers. Research by Estes and Weiner (2001) suggests that up to 75% of youth who participate in survival sex are further victimized through being sold into sexual slavery by their original exploiters.
  - Estes and Weiner’s (2001) research also suggests that 1 in 3 homeless youth will be approached for commercial sexual exchange within the first two days of hitting the street. While rates are likely lower in the Midwest, even 1 in 10 would reflect a massive failure of our capacity to protect our most vulnerable children.
- **We have over 6,300 youth in foster care in Iowa today, according to research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013).**
    - According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, over 60% of runaways rescued from sex trafficking in the U.S. are from system-engaged families or foster care, indicating a severe risk of victimization among this population.
    - Concerns regarding foster care youth’s vulnerability called Congress, with the support of Iowa’s Senator Grassley, to pass the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2014.
    - Concerns regarding the escalating crime of domestic minor sex trafficking also resulted in Congress’s passing Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (S.178) this year.
- **Thousands of young people are for sale in Iowa. Daily, over 200 active ads appear in the adult services and escort sections of Backpages.com alone; and thousands more are posted to similar sites, many of which are explicit in their intent to sell sexual services.**
    - A recent statement by the American Bar Association’s *Judges Journal* (2013) warns of the use of the Internet and a diverse array of social media to both ensnare and sell trafficking victims; and online (adult) classified ad services have been instrumental to the trafficking of minors in Iowa. ([http://www.americanbar.org/publications/judges\\_journal/2013/winter/human\\_trafficking\\_and\\_internet\\_and\\_other\\_technologies\\_too.html](http://www.americanbar.org/publications/judges_journal/2013/winter/human_trafficking_and_internet_and_other_technologies_too.html))
    - The Iowa Office of the Attorney General has documented the probable extent of the sex trade in our state, and their research suggests that victims are for sale from our most rural to urban communities. Related, Braking Traffik estimates that up to 40% of Iowa’s online adult services ads are minors.
- **Human trafficking victims tend to be our state’s most vulnerable persons, but not always. The demand among buyers for trafficked youth is so great that traffickers are infiltrating our public schools, popular youth hangouts, and activities such as sporting events to find victims.**
    - College students have been approached and victimized by traffickers; and youth from middle-class homes often come forward after presentations on the topic to say that they have been approached as well. While traffickers target society’s most vulnerable, the tremendous demand for commercial sex compels them to seek victims from all socio-demographic groups.
      - Undercover officers in Iowa tell me that it takes them over 45 minutes to get through to a number posted for an escort ad, because the phone lines are jammed; and that if they post a fake ad for law enforcement purposes, they begin to receive calls – many calls -- within the first hour.
    - Traffickers are hiring middle and high school youth to identify vulnerable peers to recruit into victimization; and they stalk our malls, bus stops, youth shelters, and popular youth hangouts. More recently, they may be using young adult girls to invite middle and high school youth from Iowa’s rural communities to attend parties involving drugs, alcohol, adult themes, and interactions with pimps.
    - Iowa has an ample number of vulnerable youth, also, including the over 10,030 who experience homelessness; over 6,300 in foster care; over 147,000 living in poverty; and thousands more in families where they face insecure housing; domestic violence, sexual abuse, and neglect; and substance abuse.

- One of the tragic consequences of the growth of the human trafficking trade is that some abusive, impoverished, and drug-addicted parents and guardians are learning that they can sell children to pay the rent or purchase illicit substances from drug dealers.
- More commonly, vulnerable youth are targeted for trafficking recruitment, and this is particularly the case for those who have been sexually abused at home.

We need you to vote affirmatively on SF497, to protect our youth and families, to rid Iowa of this heinous crime and the affiliated crimes it supports, and to ensure that Iowa's economic development is supported by ethical business practices which foster the wellbeing of all of our citizenry.

SF497 will strengthen Iowa's law enforcement and justice response to human trafficking, through the provision of training which will empower them to identify, investigate, and effectively prosecute this crime. Again, strengthening our law enforcement and justice system is central to saving the lives of victims and reducing demand: Research by the U.S. Department of Justice shows that unless victims are identified and rescued and perpetrators punished, demand escalates and human traffickers deepen their operations in our communities.

SF497 also supports advocacy services on behalf of survivors. Once law enforcement is trained to identify and rescue victims, victims are transformed into "survivors" through the care and compassion of advocates who stand by them as they seek healing and restoration. Indeed, how we respond to survivors in the first 48 hours upon rescue largely predicts their willingness to accept services and shelter and, eventually, cooperate with law enforcement and prosecutors.

*Due to Michael Ferjak's recent testimony to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on Iowa's efforts to combat human trafficking, our national leaders are expecting Iowa to serve as a model state for addressing this crime. Mr. Ferjak's strategic planning for Operation Detour, the Iowa Office of the Attorney General's anti-trafficking initiative, however, requires funding for successful implementation.*

In partnership with the Attorney General's efforts to end human trafficking in Iowa, through Operation Detour, the Network Against Human Trafficking respectfully requests your support for SF497.

With all sincerity and respect for your service,



Dr. Teresa Downing-Matibag

Cell: 515.509.6426

Email: [downingterri@gmail.com](mailto:downingterri@gmail.com)