

**Testimony Before the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Health**

Hearing

“Examining H.R. ____, the Trafficking Awareness Training for Health Care Act of 2014”

Testimony

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Chairman Pitts, Representative Ellmers, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today to support this groundbreaking bill for the training of health care professionals to better work with victims of human trafficking.

My name is Vednita Carter. I am a survivor of sexual exploitation. I am also the founder and executive director of Breaking Free, a nonprofit agency in St. Paul, Minnesota. Breaking Free’s mission is to educate and provide services to women and girls who have been victims of abuse and sexual exploitation and need assistance escaping violence in their lives. Breaking Free is survivor-led and serves more than 500 victims each year.

In the case of virtually every sex trafficking victim we have worked with, they were recruited, coerced, defrauded, or forced into prostitution. Once girls and women are involved in the life of sex trafficking, it is extraordinarily difficult for them to escape. We can never forget that sex trafficking is modern day slavery.

Sex trafficking causes tremendous trauma for victims from the physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual assault, kidnapping, and torture they have experienced. It is a terrifying and dangerous life. 83% of our clients at Breaking Free were assaulted with a deadly weapon and 57% were kidnapped before they escaped sex trafficking. 86% suffer from some type of emotional, physical, or mental disability. 71% of the victims we serve suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

One survivor's story illustrates some of the health issues victims of sex trafficking face. As she told me:

"I was trafficked when I was 11 years old by my foster mother, who let her boyfriend sell us to other men. By the time I was 12, I had a pimp. During this time I was beaten, burned, raped, and assaulted. Sometimes I went to a local neighborhood health clinic to be treated, but no one ever asked me what had happened to me, and if they did, I lied because I was afraid of my pimp. I had severe depression, anxiety, paranoia, and mental health issues, even after I became free. I got pregnant six times and had six abortions during this time. I had severe scar tissue from these abortions, because there was no follow up care. In a couple of cases I had bad infections—so bad that I eventually had to have a hysterectomy. To this day I have physical, mental, and emotional issues as a result of that time on the street."

Another survivor said:

“I was beaten, strangled, kicked, punched, raped, and hit on the head by my pimp. I wasn’t able to escape until I was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and since then have I been battling serious physical and mental health problems including headaches, shortness of breath, bronchitis, chest pain, chlamydia, vaginal infections, and urinary tract infections. I also suffered from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. I attempted suicide several times.”

All too often, victims of sex trafficking slip through the cracks of our medical system. Without appropriate training, health professionals are not able to put the pieces of the puzzle together to see that the woman or girl in their examination room is a sex trafficking victim. Or if the professional is able to see the signs, she or he doesn’t know how to talk to a victim without shaming or re-traumatizing her. Or the professional may be unaware of community resources to help the victim.

Health care professionals are in an excellent position to identify and help victims—but they need coordinated, evidence-based, and trauma-informed training to be able to do so. The “Trafficking Awareness Training for Health Care Act of 2014” offers the medical community the opportunity to develop best practices for identifying and caring for victims and the opportunity to help thousands of victims in our nation break free.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.