

Dear members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Katie Newell and I serve as the Human Trafficking Case Manager Coordinator for Vermont, my office is located at the South Burlington Police Department and I have been in this position since 2018. I supervise Zoe Nixon in her role as Human Trafficking Case Manager located out of the Bennington Police Department. Together we serve as a neutral point of contact for individuals who are experiencing exploitation. In addition to my responsibilities as the Case Manager Coordinator, I co-chair a Human Trafficking Training and Outreach Committee, providing training throughout the State and co-facilitate a Human Trafficking Multi-Disciplinary Team for Chittenden County.

Our positions are unique where we are able to serve individuals who have experiences of exploitation through sex or labor trafficking, regardless if they are working with law enforcement. The Human Trafficking Case Management program was created to offer support that looks and feels different than other supports that already exist—it is defined and driven by the needs, safety and readiness of the client.

Human trafficking is a fundamental abuse of human rights and dignity. Human trafficking is the intentional exploitation of vulnerable individuals for the exploiters financial gain, using force, fraud or coercion. We also work with individuals who may be experiencing exploitation that may not fit the legal definition of trafficking but engaging in work to meet a basic need. That could mean trading sex, drugs, and/or guns for money, food, a place to stay or to support a substance use disorder. Both involve the exploitation of individual vulnerabilities predicated on social inequities and marginalized populations.

Through our role as case managers, we walk beside our service users to understand their unique experiences and help navigate the system to identify resources that meet their individual needs. Over the last year, finding adequate resources for our service users has proven incredibly challenging. Our service users are often seen as criminals within our justice system. Many are being forced to pay for a debt through whatever means necessary. Countless individuals are being forced to participate in retail theft, grand larceny, legal and illegal purchase of firearms, providing transportation in and out of State for larger level drug dealers to move product, bagging and cooking illicit substances, engaging in commercial sex acts and more. I am hopeful with more structure and accountability; we will have the opportunity to change the

lives of our youth population. They are among some of the most vulnerable and most impressionable. Many of the adult service users we are working with have been system involved as youth and I am left to wonder if we were able to provide more intentional support when they were younger, would that have set a better foundation for them in their future.

I am writing in support of adding the following offenses:

- Carrying a dangerous weapon while committing a felony in violation of 13 V.S.A. § 4005 (or attempt)
- Human trafficking or aggravated human trafficking in violation of 13 V.S.A. § 2652 or 2653 (or attempt)
- Trafficking a regulated drug in violation of 18 V.S.A. chapter 84 1 (or attempt)
- Domestic Assault as defined in 13 V.S.A. § 1042, first degree aggravated domestic assault as defined in 13 V.S.A. § 1043, and second degree aggravated domestic assault as defined in 13 V.S.A. § 1043, and second degree aggravated domestic assault as defined in 13 V.S.A. § 1044 (or attempt)
- Aggravated stalking as defined in 13 V.S.A. § 1063 (a) (3) (or attempt)

Our system and society fail to acknowledge the lack of support and supervision many of our youth face. The juveniles that service providers are interfacing with are engaging in criminal behavior and then being shown through our judicial system that actions don't have consequences. We are seeing an increase of gang activity with the youth in our State, driven by a need to feel loved and supported.

I continue to observe a large-scale trend of juveniles, some under the age of 16, purchasing and possessing firearms, stealing cars, selling drugs, engaging in threatening behavior, causing physical harm, and not having any respect for authority. Guns, specifically, are being used to provide a young person power and respect at a time when they may be feeling disconnected, uncared for, or isolated from critical emotional connections. A juvenile having access to a firearm is a symbol of power and acts as a power amplifier.

Many individuals we serve are often seen as both perpetrators and victims. A big 12 should not mean that someone is in jail for the rest of their lives, but this could be the only time they access services. I recently spoke to a young client of mine who has come leaps and bounds over the last year of working together. I asked her if she would have been receptive to services if she did not have conditions to do so, and the answer was no. She stated that she wouldn't

know what her options were and was appreciative of the persistent nature of her team to encourage her to keep working on herself and meeting goals.

We know that anyone who is not having their basic needs met is vulnerable within our society. The thrilling lifestyle that gangs offer includes the simple attraction of money, material possessions and a “thrilling lifestyle”. Just as a trafficker is a person who is very skilled at spotting vulnerabilities and may have grown up in similar situations as the individual for which they are exploiting, we are observing juveniles coming together to form their own allegiance in a gang. National studies show that the average age of entry into gang life is 13, the number one reason for joining a gang is because friends were members or associates.

Many of the juveniles we believe are engaged in gang activity share similar vulnerabilities:

- Unstable homelife, single parent household
- Poor or disjointed family connections and/or family values
- History of running away
- Lack of self-identity
- Low socioeconomic standing
- Victim of bullying in school or community

This attachment hooks the youth into compliance and, through filling their needs, builds a bond that instills confidence within their relationship. This bond makes these juveniles believe that this lifestyle is the only way and that the individuals they are associated with truly care. This can make it difficult for the youth to feel that they can relate to any other person or service provider. This gives “the life” an advantage over friends, family, law enforcement and service providers because this strong attachment creates a trauma bond. These bonds make it difficult for the young gang members to believe that anyone else could understand or relate to them the way their new “family” could.

Our hope is that we can hold individuals accountable for causing harm AND provide adequate services that will meet the needs of individuals who do not fit into the societal norms of what a victim should be. We know that it can be successful for service providers to work within the system to support individuals in meeting their own self-actualization. We also know this cannot be done without a multidisciplinary team approach. If actions do not have consequences, what is the purpose of engaging in services?

