

Amanda Cochrane  
Senate Judiciary Committee: Testimony on Sex Trafficking  
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My name is Amanda Cochrane and I am the Executive Director of Umbrella, an organization which serves the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont including Orleans, Essex and Caledonia counties. Our work centers on cultivating a NEK where all people thrive – free from abuse and oppression. We offer a variety of programming including domestic and sexual violence support and prevention work, job-training with women and youth who have barriers to employment, supervised visitation and connection to appropriate, affordable child care for those who need financial assistance.

In all our work at Umbrella – supporting our community’s most vulnerable citizens is something we do each day. People that we work with come with a variety of co-occurring challenges related to trauma, poverty, drug use disorder and very high level of everyday stress related to their survival and meeting their basic needs.

The NEK is comprised of some of the least populous, least densely settled counties in the state. We have the lowest median household incomes in Vermont: Essex County (\$35,567), Orleans (\$41,437) and Caledonia (\$45,089). Essex and Orleans Counties lead the state in percent of population in poverty (16.9% and 16.7% respectively) and Caledonia County is well above the statewide rate of 12% at 14.1%. Though the Northeast Kingdom represents only 19% of the state’s population, 24% of all Vermonters receiving opioid treatment live in the Kingdom.

This context is directly related to what I am here to talk with you about today - youth in our community and their vulnerability to sex-trafficking.

Young people at risk for trafficking are those who already have histories of trauma in their lives. These are often youth who have experienced sexual abuse as a child, may be in state care, and often have had a high level of dysfunction in their families including domestic violence, mental illness, drug addiction, and deep poverty. These are children for whom Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACE scores, are high. Youth are vulnerable to being lured into commercial sexual exploitation much in the way the same girls are more vulnerable to abusive dating partners or other sexual predators. They are identified and sought out for their vulnerability because these youth are in need of love and care, and struggle on a daily basis to have their basic needs met. People that seek to exploit these youth, often offer them a sense of safety as well as access to a place to live, food to eat and gifts. Often girls are then coerced into sexual acts by a so-called “boyfriend” and then forced into sexual acts with others in order to keep a place to stay and food to eat. With the rise of the opioid epidemic, drugs and addiction are also a major factor in this form of exploitation.

One of the areas we see youth most vulnerable is related to how we house the homeless in this state. We see many vulnerable girls in our community who are living in and out of a hotel or motel with a parent. Many of these hotels become places where vulnerable youth are targeted and preyed upon. While a parent may be struggling with addiction and finding a place to live, young people in the family are along for the ride, often in precarious situations. Housing people with many of the same issues all together may be easier for the state or social service agencies,

but it is not ideal for vulnerable people – and vulnerable youth in particular. These youth are susceptible at being lured in by traffickers and are at risk of sexual abuse including commercial sexual exploitation.

At Umbrella we offer a variety of support services to address the needs of the most at-risk populations of young people in our community. Last year we served over 2,000 youth in area schools with prevention programming, and groups that target youth who are vulnerable to victimization. The prevention work is geared towards children and youth – from pre-K through college. Our messaging is age-appropriate and aims to build skills around body safety and respect, bystander behavior, and building empathy for victims. We offer workshops on the use of technology and highlight tactics predators use on the internet. We also work with some local schools on providing supportive weekly groups on healthy relationships for youth identified by school staff as kids who are otherwise “falling through the cracks”. Most of these children had witnessed domestic violence at home or had been sexually abused themselves.

We also offer training to teachers through a Teacher’s Guide put together through the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the Department of Children and Families. One of the three themes in the guide is around training teachers on identifying signs that a youth might be at risk of or is being trafficked.

There is a lot more to be done to ensure youth in our state are equipped with the basics they need to help protect them from being targeted by traffickers – including meeting the basic survival needs of our most vulnerable Vermonters, providing safe and affordable housing, improved emergency housing and availability of funding for prevention based programming for at-risk youth.