



April 2, 2019

Sen. Dick Sears Jr., Chair
Sen. Joe Benning, Vice Chair
Sen. Jeanette K. White
Sen. Alice W. Nitka, Clerk
Sen. Tim Ashe
Senate Committee on Judiciary
State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602

Dear Senators,

Thank you for speaking with me today to highlight some of the unique vulnerabilities LGBTQ youth face in relation to human trafficking. Disparate rates of homelessness, dating and sexual violence, and substance use are all factors that compound the risk of victimization, increasing the susceptibility of LGBTQ youth to trafficking and exploitation.

Family rejection contributes to the disproportionate numbers of LGBTQ youth who experience homelessness. National research conducted by the Williams Institute indicates that 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. (Comparatively, a 2017 Gallup poll shows that 4.5% of the overall US population identify as LGBTQ.) Shelter access is limited based on age, which drastically impacts the number of beds available to youth. This shortage is heightened by a dearth of shelter services that are able and willing to support LGBTQ survivors, forcing LGBTQ youth to rely on less regulated options, including couch surfing.

One Outright youth disclosed that she had been staying on a friend's couch for a number of weeks when, one night, that friend instigated a sexual encounter. The youth did not want to jeopardize her housing, decreasing her agency in that moment. Later, when the youth tried to return to her family home, her family asked her to leave again because she had been exposed to bed bugs. The youth returned to couch-surfing.

Vermont's 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data indicates an escalated risk of substance use for LGBTQ youth, who are twice as likely to misuse prescription drugs when compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers. The increased risk of using or misusing drugs in turn inflates LGBTQ youth's vulnerabilities to traffickers who often employ substance dependence as a tool of power and control.

Dating and sexual violence are additional risk factors that exacerbate vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. Vermont's 2017 YRBS showed that LGBTQ youth are nearly 3x more likely to be hit or slapped by a partner and nearly 4x more likely to be physically forced to have sex when compared with their cisgender and heterosexual peers. LGBTQ youth may also be isolated from peers and adults, unable to come out about what kind of relationship they are in, which in turn reduces the likelihood of accessing help.

None of these additional risk factors for LGBTQ youth are inherent to their sexual or gender identities. Rather, the additional stress and pain of navigating a world that constantly undermines their sense of self worth,



relationships with peers and families, and creates barriers in community resources all serve to heighten their vulnerability to trafficking. Counter-measures that correspond to the root causes of the risks are the most effective, sustainable, and impactful prevention strategies against trafficking.

Where LGBTQ youth are isolated, we work to create supportive communities. Outright hosts four Friday Night Groups (FNGs) that meet in Burlington, Brattleboro, Montpelier, and Morrisville. Youth who may never have met another LGBTQ person can come to FNG, access a hot meal, and find themselves in a room of youth and adult facilitators who share identities with them. Youth steer the scope of the conversation, building trust and self-determination into the process. If topics relating to dating, sexual violence, or trafficking come up, facilitators follow up with that youth, refer them to services, and connect them to Outright staff for additional support. Moreover, youth are often the first to identify when a friend is in an unsafe situation, making spaces where youth are safe to share stories about the experiences of friends with trusted adults even more valuable in the effort to combat trafficking.

Outright also works to build safe, supportive intergenerational communities through faculty, administration, and service provider trainings, as well as Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) support in schools. GSAs are student groups that may offer social support, akin to Friday Night Groups, in a school setting. GSAs can often be active in their communities, improving school climates for LGBTQ youth who may otherwise feel alone in their experiences. Working to increase the number of supportive adults can also serve as a trafficking counter-measure: If youth know they have an adult they can turn to when faced with family rejection, dating, or sexual violence, they may be able to access help before, during, or after a crisis.

As a final and vital counter-measure, the systemic underpinnings that enable trafficking must be addressed through prevention education and advocacy. Misogyny, homo-and-transphobia, and racism all serve as tools to dehumanize, increase vulnerability, and justify exploitation. For example: While Vermont maintains robust anti-discrimination statutes, 26 states in the US do not prohibit sexual or gender identity discrimination in employment. Additionally, on April 12, 2019, the Trump administration is poised to prohibit transgender service members from arguably the largest employer in the world: the United States military. Employment discrimination and job shortages leave LGBTQ communities under-employed, jeopardizing stable housing, and increasing risk of exploitation and victimization.

Trafficking is a complex and nuanced challenge, and our collective responses must be equally nuanced. We at Outright Vermont are grateful to this committee for taking the time to consider how vulnerable populations experience unique risks of exploitation and barriers to support. Please reach out if I can provide any further information about the experiences of LGBTQ youth. I look forward to supporting your efforts to combat trafficking in Vermont.

With Gratitude,

Amanda Rohdenburg
Director of Advocacy
Outright Vermont