

# Victims of human trafficking need more help

WASHINGTON - Although the United States has made progress in addressing human trafficking, more needs to be done to help trafficking victims, particularly children, said a U.S. Catholic official in testimony before a House committee.

"From the Catholic perspective, human trafficking represents a scourge on the earth which must be eradicated," said Anastasia Brown, director of refugee programs of Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

She applauded the efforts already made to stop human trafficking, such as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, which Congress reauthorized in 2003 and 2005.

But in her testimony before the House Judiciary Committee Oct. 31, she stressed that trafficking victims need "access to a continuum of services in order to attain self-sufficiency and restored mental and physical health."

Most victims of trafficking are "commonly linked by poverty and lack of opportunity" and are sold into bondage as prostitutes, domestic workers and child laborers, she said.

As a means of helping these victims recover from such experiences, Brown urged committee members to support the Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2007.

The legislation, named for the parliamentarian whose efforts led to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in the early 19th century, was written by Reps. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., Chris Smith, R-N.J., and John Conyers, D-Mich.

In highlighting aspects of the bill, which MRS supports, Brown specifically noted provisions aimed to "help fill the gaps in the continuum of care for victims." She said her office particularly favors plans to help children either through speeding up the process of getting services to them or providing more funding for benefits.

“Children have fallen through the cracks” in human trafficking enforcement efforts, she said, even though statistics indicate “that many more children are being held involuntarily in trafficking situations in the United States than we have so far identified.”

She also noted that the number of trafficked children does not match the number who have received services, pointing out that “of the nearly 17,500 persons trafficked into the United States, each year, an estimated one-third of them are children, but there have been few referrals of children for services since 2000.”

Brown said she strongly supports efforts covered by the proposed legislation to keep families together and requiring that federal, state and local authorities receive training in referring child victims of trafficking for assistance as soon as they are identified.

She also stressed that more avenues “should be created for the referral of trafficking victims for certification and services.”

Brown noted that service agencies of the Catholic Church, particularly Catholic Charities, provide support services to adult and child victims of trafficking, including health and mental health services, employment assistance, English-language training, counseling, housing and other material assistance needs.

She urged that the legislation include increased efforts to help children, noting that gaps in care for these children only intensify their hardships if they are deported, placed in overburdened local child welfare systems or released back to traffickers or their associates.

But just identifying these children is not enough, she stressed. She said they need to be referred to refugee programs for minors to get care and to avoid being placed in short-term shelters or state foster care. Short-term care, she said, will most likely prevent proper assessment and treatment for these children and will not provide them with long-term safety and security.

She recommended that the legislation should develop a “safe haven” for these children to determine their needs and provide long-term care arrangements if

necessary.

Brown said the Catholic Church recognizes the “special vulnerability” of trafficked children and is “ready to work with the federal government to develop and implement programs which address their needs.”

“I am confident that, with better coordination and cooperation between all branches of government, we can, as a nation, punish traffickers and provide appropriate care to victims,” she said.

“We also will, as a nation, influence other nations to step up their efforts to end this practice, so that vulnerable men, women and children everywhere will not become victims of the worse side of humanity,” she added.