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SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

HEARING ON THE RE-AUTHORIZATION OF THE JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION ACT OF 1974

Rural and Mental Health Services

March 30, 1992
Central Community College
Grand Island, Nebraska
Starting at 9:00 AM

WITNESSES

Panel I

Ms. Ruth Vance
Director
Panhandle Community Services
Gering, Nebraska

Father Val Peter
Director
Boys Town
Boys Town, Nebraska

Ms. Peggy Adair
Voices for Children
Omaha, Nebraska

Panel II

Ms. Carolyn Stitt
Director
Foster Care Review Board
Lincoln, Nebraska

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Panel III

Ms. Jean Lovell
Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement
and Criminal Justice
Lincoln, Nebraska

Ms. Susan Rotenburg
National Coalition for the Mentally Ill
in the Criminal Justice System
Seattle, Washington

*Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Human Resources
Field Hearing, March 30, 1992, in Grand Island, Nebraska
Regarding reauthorization of the
Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)*

Congressman Martinez, Congressman Barrett:

My name is Father Val Peter and I am Executive Director of Boys Town. In 1991 we took care of 15,000 children in 9 States of the Union. We are in large urban areas, small urban areas, and rural areas, such as the Boys Town Mid-Plains Shelter here in Central Nebraska. We are in Rhode Island, Brooklyn, Orlando, Tallahassee, South Florida, New Orleans, San Antonio, Las Vegas, Southern California, Southwest Iowa, and Omaha, Lincoln, and Grand Island, Nebraska.

We are fortunate to be able to see children in all of these different settings. We see differing ethnic groups, cultural groups, and family backgrounds. It gives us the opportunity to realize and understand both the differences between these populations of children and the similarities as well.

A. WHAT DO ABUSED CHILDREN AND YOUTH LOOK LIKE?

There is a common structure to the feelings, the problems, and the behaviors of abused children and youth in America. Let me illustrate it by the story of Martha. She comes from a small town on the Great Plains, but she could just as easily come from any town or large city in America.

Martha, age 14, told me: "I remember the first time I got drunk on purpose. I was in the first grade. My dad wanted me to get drunk so he could do those terrible things to me again. And it was the first time in my life I said to myself, maybe it is a good idea to get drunk because then the pain won't hurt so much anymore."

Martha is a 14-year-old alcoholic who is already sexually acting out with older boys. If you look at the structure of her pathetic life, you will see the following:

MARTHA

1. Powerlessness

Martha feels totally powerless in the face of her father's sexual aggression. He has told her over and over again: "You will do what I tell you to. You know that nobody will believe you if you tell them."

Martha stands powerless before a man who cannot control his own sexual drives. She feels no way in control. She feels there is no way she can change what is going on.

This all began when she was 3 years old. Her father told her: "If you tell anyone, I will kill Fluffy our dog."

DAD

1. All Powerful

MARTHA

DAD

2. My Fault Guilty/Angry

2. Not My Fault

Martha feels terribly guilty for what has been going on in her life for these 9 years. Her father has told her repeatedly: "You like it. You know you like it." And she has even begun to have orgasms and her father says: "See, I told you you liked it."

Her father also says: "This would have never started if you had not been wearing that frilly little nightgown and hopping on my lap when you were 3 years old."

Martha believes that the cause of all her troubles can be found within herself. At the core of her being, she finds herself filled with shame.

MARTHA

DAD

3. Secret

3. Keeper of the Secret

Martha and her dad have a secret. She cannot tell anyone.

If she told her mother, she is convinced her mom wouldn't believe her anyway. Her dad told her if she tells someone, she will be thrown out of the house. Well, she did tell someone, a counselor in school. And when the counsellor talked to her mother, guess what? She was thrown out of the house. And that is what brought her to our Boys Town Shelter.

MARTHA

DAD

4. Love

4. Love

As strange as this may seem, Martha who is powerless, who is guilty, and who has a terrible secret, still loves her father in some fundamental way that a child would love a parent, no matter how abusive that parent might be. And the father still loves the daughter in some fragmentary and remote fashion as a father would love his daughter.

Martha demonstrates the typical characteristics of an abused child and youth. If Martha had been physically abused, instead of sexually abused, the same characteristics would be present.

And the important fact that I would like to underline for this Subcommittee, is that these same characteristics are found for abused children in large urban areas, small urban areas, and rural areas. This is the anatomy and physiology of abuse. It is universal.

B. WHAT BEHAVIORS DO ABUSED CHILDREN ENGAGE IN?

Martha, to no one's surprise, is out of control at home. She has been skipping school. She has done drugs. She is already a full-blown alcoholic. She has attempted suicide twice. She has been caught shoplifting 3 times.

All of these behaviors are symptomatic of an abused youngster. I call them revictimizing behaviors. Why revictimizing? Because what Martha is doing over and over again is she is revictimizing herself.

She is repeating her experience of being victimized by her father in a variety of way, all of which are harmful to her.

Angry, helpless, troubled children and youth engage in these behaviors. They come from every geographic location whether rural, urban, or from the north, south, east, or west across our great nation.

And just as the original sexual abuse destroyed Martha's childhood and made it impossible for her to grow and develop normally, so these revictimizing behaviors are making it impossible for Martha to have a normal adolescence and to grow into a happy, productive adult.

C. HOW DOES MARTHA GET BETTER?

The answer is: teaching. Martha has learned antisocial and self-destructive behaviors. Martha has learned how to revictimize herself over and over again. Utilizing the denial process, Martha has become an active participant in making it more and more impossible to get better. Martha's victim behaviors are learned. Martha now needs to learn survivor behaviors. She needs to learn healthy behaviors in 4 areas:

- ▶ She needs to learn behaviors that show her she is in charge of her life. These are behaviors that show she is powerful and not powerless.
- ▶ She needs to learn behaviors that do not reinforce guilt. She needs to learn behaviors that make her feel good inside and outside, up and down.
- ▶ She needs to learn behaviors that are not hidden, that are not secret, that are not whispered. She needs to learn behaviors that are productive, constructive, and self-affirming.
- ▶ Finally, she needs to learn behaviors that are appropriate, loving behaviors. Behaviors that are noneroticized. Behaviors that are caring and sharing. These are, at heart, friendship behaviors.

In other words, there are options to drug behaviors. There are options to suicide behaviors. There are options to family-crisis behaviors.

Learning how to talk with people, communicate with people, share with people is one of those behaviors. Learning how to problem solve is a facet of communication behaviors.

D. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SERVICES FOR MARTHA IN THE RURAL AREA AND URBAN SERVICES?

If Martha lived in East Los Angeles, and wanted to do something about her problem, she may not know how or where to look for those services. If she looked, she would find all kinds of organizations listed in the phone book ready and willing to help her.

But when she tried to access those services, she would find herself, over and over again, repeatedly frustrated by long lines, overworked staff, underpaid agencies, and bureaucratic morass. In addition, she would not have access to some services because she could not pay for them or might need parental consent to get the services.

But Martha doesn't live in Brooklyn. She lives in Central Nebraska. What does she find there? The problem is not access to services. The problem is simply no services at all are available.

Her school counselor, a good person at heart, is unequipped to deal with these problems. Her rural physician is overworked and not the kind of person you could talk to. She feels he is too exalted in the community and wouldn't believe her anyway. As for the police, they have no means of helping. There are no services, no programs, and not even any reporting guidelines if a school counselor wanted to do something about it. Her minister or priest wouldn't have a clue what to do.

If Martha would be in Brooklyn, it would be scary for her just to walk down the street. And she would soon be gang related either as a victim or a victimizer or probably both. That is the deceptive thing about rural America, Congressman Martinez. You are from South Los Angeles and when you drive through rural America, it looks so peaceful and you see the spires of little country churches and everything seems well-ordered, just as the good Lord intended.

But when Martha walks down the country road, she does not see the gravity and the gang violence of Brooklyn, she simply sees: that no one cares. That is right, no one cares.

E. THREE FACTORS INVOLVED IN HELPING MARTHA

There are three vitally-important factors that must coalesce together if Martha and others like her in rural and urban areas are to be helped to find, once again, healing and hope:

- ▶ funding
- ▶ effective treatment systems
- ▶ skilled workers

Congressman Barrett and Congressman Martinez, I ask you to please realize that when we ask for further funding, it is not because we believe that is the solution to our problems. It is a major factor, but without effective treatment systems and without skilled service providers, it will simply not work.

We do need increased funding in the reauthorized Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Why can't we -- in an age when the Cold War has been won -- at least raise the budget to \$100 million.

We at Boys Town know that there must be a public/private partnership. Corporations, individuals, and all people who care about children need to join hands with us and with the government in bringing this healing and hope. Our Grand Island Mid-Plains Shelter budget is \$434,000 and of that only \$59,000 comes from this Federal Act. That means that less than 15% of the monies that are spent on our troubled children comes through this federal funding mechanism.

We are not asking for 100%, but 15% just doesn't make sense in the post Cold War era. Sometimes folks in Washington give the impression that legislation will "fix" America's problems. This Act, as important as it is, will not fix the problems of America's troubled children. But it will help.

Please write into your bill funds for:

► In-Home Intervention Services

If family intervention in the home had been possible for Martha, she would not be at the desperate stage of her life she has found herself in now.

► Parent Training

More and more American parents are becoming more and more frustrated because of behavior problems of their children. More often than not, parents are not taught how to deal with their child's behavior and, therefore, never learned how to effectively teach the correct discipline and teach children appropriate ways to behave.

► Effective Treatment Programs

Martha will not be restored to health by legislative enactments. Martha will not be restored to health by kindly, loving people who do not have the skills necessary to teach Martha new behaviors. Martha will not get better simply by giving her an ample supply of birth control pills and devices. Martha will not get better simply by giving her a roof over her head and good, warm meals.

Please make provisions in the Act for awarding effective treatment programs. Effective means outcome-based programs. Programs where kids actually get better. Avoid taking a systems-outcome approach. Too often people count as a success family reunification, without realizing that if Martha is simply reunified with her father, the abuse will continue.

F. A CONCLUDING STORY

A boy told me a story sometime ago -- I have retold it over and over again -- of a dream that he had. He was driving down Interstate 80 with 4 of his friends. Interstate 80 is that great ribbon of highway that runs across the entire United States from East to West. For some reason or other the car went out of control and ended up in a ditch with all 5 boys hurt. In the dream, the Nebraska State Highway Patrol came and promptly dispatched an ambulance which carried the other four boys to the hospital.

This boy said: "Father, I was in the back of the car. I was badly hurt. I cried out to the State Trooper and the ambulance people, 'please help me,' but none of them could hear me and none of them could see me."

So, he said, they left and he painfully got out of the wreck and forced himself to walk down the highway to an interchange. He walked down the ramp and there was a restaurant there. He struggled mightily and opened the door of the restaurant. In the dream, he called out to all the people who were eating there: "Would somebody please help me." He said: "Father, nobody heard me and nobody saw me."

His -- and Martha's -- is the real testimony you need to respond to, not mine.

Thank you very much.