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Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Subcommittee Hearing
On
Breaking the Silence on Child Sexual Abuse: Protection, Prevention, Intervention, and
Deterrence

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My name is Deborah Donovan Rice and I serve as Executive Director of Stop It Now!, a national child sexual abuse prevention organization founded nearly 20 years ago.

Since 1992 Stop It Now!® has been helping adults, families and communities speak up and have difficult conversations with one another about the sexual abuse of children. In its simplest form, our approach to prevention is about engaging adults in a dialogue; getting people to talk openly about their concerns and providing them with the tools and support necessary to protect children before they are harmed.

For nearly 20 years, we have pioneered shifting responsibility for child sexual abuse from children to adults by providing education, training, and advocacy to parents, professionals, and community leaders. Our community responsibility model teaches adults how to intervene safely and effectively when they see early warning signs of an adult or youth behaving inappropriately with a child. Our focus is on preventing child sexual abuse before children are harmed.

Introduction

Stop It Now! operates the only telephone and email help line dedicated to *preventing* child sexual abuse. For nearly 20 years, we have been talking with adults who contact us about their concerns that a child may have been or is at risk to be sexually abused. Every day, we hear from people who are worried about the safety of a child and who need balanced information, support, and practical resources for taking action in daily life to keep children safe from sexual abuse.

I want to thank you for holding this hearing today. Breaking the Silence on Child Sexual Abuse is a cause very near to my heart. One of the first ads Stop It Now! created for its work in Vermont nearly 20 years ago said "*Silence Shatters Lives.*" We know that when we don't know what to look for, when we don't speak up, when we don't consider the possibility, when we worry more about offending an adult than protecting a child, when we don't report - we let children down.

The Speak Up to Protect Every Abused Kid Act Can Be Strengthened by Adding Proactive Prevention of Child Abuse

As one of the nation's leading advocates for the prevention of child sexual abuse, we support Senate bill 1877, the Speak Up to Protect Every Abused Kid Act. We also offer our expertise in the belief that this bill can be strengthened to include proactive prevention of child sexual abuse.

Mandatory reporting comes too late to prevent child sexual abuse.

Mandatory reporting focuses on abuse that has already happened. By expanding the responsibility of adults to report suspected and known incidents of abuse, S. 1877 may have a

positive impact by potentially shortening the length of time a child experiences abuse or preventing one abuser from abusing another child.

This is very important, but is it enough? I don't want to tell a child or tell a parent that we "caught" it earlier and that it could have been much worse. I want to be able to tell all children who have ever experienced sexual abuse that as adults we are doing everything we can to ensure that no other child ever experiences the sexual abuse that they have lived through.

We are concerned that an overemphasis on mandatory reporting signals that as a society, we do not believe in preventing harm in the first place and that we accept the inevitability that children will be harmed.

To Protect Children, We Need to Address the Reality that Most Children Don't Tell Anyone About Their Abuse

Stop It Now!'s research mirrors national statistics that indicate nearly 88% of sexual assault is never reported to authorities. Almost a quarter (23%) of residents disclosed experiencing sexually abusive behavior by an adult or older child while they were children. Of these, nearly seven in ten (65%) did not tell an adult about the incident while still a child. Of those who did tell an adult, only three in ten (31%) recall that their abuse was reported to authorities.

Our colleagues at Darkness to Light cite similar statistics:

- 73% of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year. 45% of victims do not tell anyone for at least 5 years (Smith et al., 2000; Broman-Fulks et al., 2007).
- 40% of victims that do disclose tell a close friend, rather than an adult or authority figure (Broman-Fulks et al., 2007). These "friend-to-friend" disclosures do not always result in reports to the authorities. As a result, the vast majority of child sexual abuse incidents are never reported.

To protect children, we need to address the reality that most children don't tell anyone about their abuse. Research and anecdotal evidence shows that many reasons impact a child's lack of disclosure: threats, confusion, fear that someone they love will get in trouble, that they'll be blamed, etc. Even when asked directly, many children deny experiencing abuse even when their abuse had been witnessed by others.

Adults need to be more knowledgeable about who sexually abuses, how they access children, and how adults need to set proactive boundaries with the adults who spend time with their children.

Requiring All Adults to be Mandatory Reporters Will Not Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

Mandatory reporting is not a cure-all. We can't rely exclusively on mandatory reporting to protect our children. Given the challenges faced by already overburdened systems, reporting is not always effective for children and families in crisis. Through our Help Services, we hear from people who have reported their concerns to authorities but no case is opened or it falls to the wayside because there is a lack of evidence.

We hear from callers who are scared and frustrated because after their child disclosed abuse to them and they reported it, the child, scared by the whole process, recanted in the investigation or the subsequent forensic interview (usually at a local Child Advocacy Center). The case was then closed and no further investigation or proceedings could happen. This allows the adult who the child said was sexually abusing them to have unsupervised contact with the child.

Mandatory reporting is necessary, but by itself will not prevent the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases. Strategies to prevent child sexual abuse over the long-term must change societal norms so that society can talk more productively about the issue, while making appropriate help, support and accountability readily available to those who have been victimized, to those who have harmed children, and to the families of both.

Prevention Education and Training Can Reduce Barriers to Reporting

From surveys, focus groups and the Helpline, we know that adults face the following barriers to taking action to prevent child sexual abuse:

- Not knowing or recognizing 'warning sign' behaviors that should elicit concern and prompt more questions
- Fear of being wrong about suspicions or acting on concerns that are ultimately unfounded.
- Fear of making things worse for the child.
- Perceiving only two options for action which are both unsatisfactory: to stay uninvolved or to report the situation to authorities.
- Not knowing where to turn for credible information or to safely explore options.

We urge the Committee to expand the training requirements in Senate Bill 1877 beyond mandatory reporting training to supporting more comprehensive training that educates adults on recognizing and intervening at the first sign of inappropriate behavior or boundaries rather than waiting until children have been sexually abused.

Adults Need Help to Overcome Barriers to Taking Action.

Our survey findings show that the adult public is ready to do more to fulfill their responsibility to protect children through prevention action. U.S. adults are aware and looking for help, and appear open to pragmatic solutions. But adults need guidance, support, and reassurance that there are effective actions to take. They need to know that it is okay to speak out about a concern without fear of punishment.

Stop It Now! and others have shown that providing adults and communities with accurate information and access to the non-judgmental support and guidance of professionals can produce preventive actions. By offering a confidential place to first talk about observations and concerns, adults are able to map out action steps to keep children safe.

To Change Behavior We Need More Than An Educational Campaign

As one of the nation's leading advocates for the prevention of child sexual abuse, Stop It Now! has nearly 20 years of experience educating adults about how to take action to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Between 1995 and 2007, Stop It Now! and its local program affiliates commissioned ten telephone surveys to gauge adult knowledge and attitudes. Our report, *What Do U.S. Adults Think about Child Sexual Abuse? Measures of Knowledge and Attitudes Among Six States* (attached), summarizes key findings and program implications from an analysis of a new, statistically valid, national dataset of over 5,000 US adults. This research confirms what our local market research told us: while awareness of child sexual abuse is high, there is a disconnect between individual awareness and action to prevent it.

Adults Need Help to Recognize and Report Inappropriate Behavior in People We Know and Like

Most adults indicated that they would take action if they were concerned about the sexual safety of a child, but many appear not to recognize abuse or do not do anything if they do. Fear of the negative consequences that people can face if they raise questions about child sexual abuse within their families or social circles helps explain why more adults do not recognize abuse or act on their concerns.

A fundamental barrier is the inability to connect a person someone knows and cares for with the stereotype of the 'predator' or 'monster' who abuses children. It is often difficult to recognize and acknowledge abusive behavior involving individuals we know and trust, especially family members. Help Services give adults language to talk about what they are observing, what their gut tells them, and how to talk to adults whose behavior concerns them.

In our surveys, there is a clear difference in how respondents said that they would deal with family versus non-family members. It is clear that when abuse is considered definite, or when it is from outside the respondents' family, the course of action is to report to authorities. If the abuse or suspected abuse takes place within the family, respondents are most likely to say they would talk to or confront the suspected offender.

Barriers to reporting are even higher within families. People fear loss of family relationships, loss of financial support, threats of additional violence, loss of child custody, and a wide range of other negative impacts on the child and family due to public disclosure.

Adults Need a Safe Place to Discuss Their Concerns

At Stop It Now!, we've learned that when people have accurate and balanced information, practical resources, and access to support they do take action to keep children safe. Here's what Helpline callers say:

- *"Stop It Now! has helped me to not only find the information I needed, but has also helped me with how to use it – how to talk with my family and how to approach this in a positive way."*
- *"After talking to you I feel like I have some control over a situation that before felt completely out of control. This conversation has helped me make some decisions."*
(anonymous comments, used with permission)

It is a Better Investment of Federal Resources to Fund Programs and Resources that Educate Adults about the Ways they can Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect

Senate Bill 1877 includes provisions for educating adults about the ways they can respond to help children and families without reporting in situations where the child or family needs assistance to prevent such circumstances from deteriorating so as to constitute child abuse or neglect. We support this as essential to preventing children from being sexually abused.

In addition to supporting training on State laws for mandatory reporting, we ask the committee to support Prevention Education and Training such as those offered by Darkness to Light and Stop It Now! Both organizations have developed and maintain extensive websites that provide free information for anyone who wants to learn what they can do to keep children safe from sexual abuse. This information ranges from reproducible tip sheets on prevention topics to on-line training about how to recognize and react responsibly to prevent sexual abuse.

Education Can Reduce the Disconnect Between Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse and Action to Prevent it

Our research shows adults are aware that the vast majority of children are sexually abused by someone they know, that people who sexually abuse children live in their communities and how to recognize signs of a child who has been sexually abused. Adults don't know how to recognize someone who is at risk to abuse and are unclear about what action to take to keep children safe.

When asked a hypothetical question about what they would do that if they were in a situation where they thought a child was being sexually abused, the vast majority (91%) said they would intervene. A small proportion (8%) of residents surveyed had the experience of knowing an adult they were concerned may have been sexually abusing a child. When asked what action they actually took, 65% said that they took action – and 22% stated that they did nothing. None of us wants to think we're a person who does nothing and yet, too many of us, when faced with a situation in our own lives, are paralyzed and don't know what to say or do, especially when we don't have "proof" that someone has already harmed a child.

Requiring a Report Without Providing Adults with Access to Accurate and Balanced Information, Practical Resources, and Access to Support is not likely to Significantly Improve Reporting Rates

In the first two weeks after the sexual abuse allegations at Penn State, our Help Services experienced a 130% increase in contacts. Many of these were survivors or their friends and family, who were reaching out for help for the first time. We heard from parents with questions about the behaviors of adults in their children's schools, churches and neighborhoods. Adults called with concerns about behaviors between children. Extended family members wanted to know how to talk with other family members about their concerns about interactions between children and adults. We also heard from parents who have reported child sexual abuse and feel stuck in the criminal justice system, struggling to find help to keep their children safe, even after there's been a disclosure.

Our Helpline is the primary referral resource for other organizations including Child help, RAINN, Darkness to Light, 1in6, and Enough Abuse for calls addressing child sexual abuse and prevention.

Require CSA Prevention Training as a Condition of Any Federal Grant Involving Children and Youth

In concert with the National Coalition to Prevent Child Abuse and Exploitation's guiding values, Stop It Now! and our partner Darkness to Light have associated with Prevent Child Abuse America to advocate for a new standard for child sexual abuse prevention and intervention. We three national organizations have joined together to support federal agencies in finding ways to integrate child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention policies and practices into schools, child and youth-serving organizations, law enforcement agencies and other federally-funded programs. With established policies and procedures in place for addressing child sexual abuse, all adult staff within an organization – from the janitorial staff and bus drivers to the CEO – would know what steps must be taken to prevent abuse by creating safety for children and also how to recognize, respond to, or report abuse.

The federal government can play a significant role in the prevention of child sexual abuse. The solution is inexpensive and currently available: training adults how to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to incidents or allegations of abuse. Prevention training increases knowledge, improves attitudes, and changes child-protective behaviors. Further, evidence based programs currently exist to help organizations establish internal policies and procedures for dealing with reports and incidents of child sexual abuse. Because the federal government annually supports numerous youth-serving organizations through millions of dollars in programmatic funding, we believe the federal government can serve as a role model in advancing policies that better protect children from child sexual abuse. We urge Congress to support policies that would require federal grant recipients -- for those grants involving youth -- to train all adults, involved in the program, in child sexual abuse prevention. This requirement should be a special condition for all federal grants that involve children and youth programming and services.

Early Identification and Intervention Saves Money

The sexual abuse of a child has significant financial and social costs. One of the most thorough studies to calculate the costs of sexual violence was completed in Minnesota. It found that the financial costs associated with the sexual assault of a child total \$207,000.¹⁷ This does not include long-term consequences of child sexual abuse and societal costs. Investing more money in prevention will not only keep children safe, but will dramatically decrease the long-term health and welfare costs associated with child sexual abuse.

Fund demonstration projects and research to identify barriers and develop program innovations and policy changes that can help overcome or remove barriers to prevention action.

At Stop It Now! we know very well that too often trusted community institutions fail to keep our children safe. What we can do to prevent the next Penn State? Because, unfortunately, it will happen again, unless something fundamental changes.

By focusing on and investing in demonstration projects and research that helps us identify and overcome barriers to not acting to protect children, we can this into a tipping point where we can look back and say, "Things have changed. Adults know what to do and do it, even when it is uncomfortable."

We can't rely exclusively on mandatory reporting to protect our children. We are reminded that we can't rely on the "system" to prevent children from being sexually abused. And, we don't have a "system" for prevention. We have systems for investigating reports but we don't have systems that mobilize when we're worried and get an icky feeling in our gut when seeing someone interact with a child.

We need widespread prevention education and training of adults to create a true tipping point that prevents child sexual abuse before children are harmed.