

**Testimony before the Public Oversight Hearing on the
Performance of the Metropolitan Police Department**

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I come to you as a social worker with nearly 20 years of experience working with children in some of the District's most challenging neighborhoods. I thought I'd seen everything, until last April when I discovered a disgrace that rivals them all. Children are going missing every day in our nation's capital and in some cases, nobody is looking for them. Many times, their parent is heading up a lonely search with little help. I know of three examples of this: one youth turned up dead, another is still missing, and a third was discovered by child welfare authorities in California. This third story is the one I know best.

I have known "Shawna" since she was 6-years-old when I worked at her school. She had more personality than Rudy Huxtable, as she bounded down the hallway, her uniform perfectly pressed and her hair in neat twists bouncing behind her.

Now I run children's programs at family homeless shelters. When I saw a homemade missing person poster with Shawna's 14-year-old smiling face on it at the DC General Shelter last April, I was stunned. I called her mom and she was beside herself. When Shawna's mom felt like DC police were not taking her daughter's case seriously, her tiny room in the shelter became "central command." She made her own posters, fielded calls about sightings and tips herself, and followed up on leads at all hours of the night. "We encourage families to conduct their own search efforts," a police lieutenant later explained to me. During her search, Shawna's mom had a hard time eating and sleeping. She was literally on her own and missed weeks of work without pay. Shawna's two worried brothers also missed school, becoming "detectives," searching for their sister around town and putting up posters. Every time mom got a tip, she would rush the boys into a car she borrowed, pick up their father, and drive to whatever scary park some stranger thought Shawna was spotted.

I filed a report with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). I was surprised the police had not done this. I was told by MPD that they do not routinely inform parents or advocates of their right to make these reports because they "don't want NCMEC to be overwhelmed." I called NCMEC and was told, "Please overwhelm us; that's our mission to find these kids, we want ALL missing children referred to us by MPD and CFSA, especially in a tiny jurisdiction like DC where youth can easily cross state lines."

I could not believe it when her mom said the detective was not returning her calls. When they did not return mine either, I asked for a meeting with MPD and the Mayor's Office for Public Safety. Nothing of substance came from this meeting at all. While MPD says in their written answers for this performance hearing that they "treat victims with compassion and listen to them objectively without criticism and judgment," the way they spoke about Shawna to me made this very hard to imagine. As an advocate for the child, I felt intimidated, insulted, and undermined, like I was on trial. In our meeting, the lieutenant criticized Shawna for telling her pimp that she had permission to go to California and for not being forthcoming with

authorities. Anyone in the field will tell you Shawna's reluctance is "textbook" behavior for victims of severe abuse like sex trafficking. Plus, under federal human trafficking law, it does not matter if the child is a willing participant or crosses state lines.

When I asked why 14-year-old Shawna did not get a missing person poster or mom did not get a return phone call for ten days, all I heard from them was victim blaming and a full-throated defense of the bureaucracy. The homeless working mother of three was criticized for not reporting the case immediately and for reporting it to the wrong agency (Protective Services, which patrol the grounds of DC General). MPD said that they were not able to reach mom by phone, so why didn't they make a simple home visit to get the case moving for Shawna? They knew where her mom lived. They said they couldn't make a flyer because they did not have a picture, not bothering to go to her mother or her school to get one. Overall, MPD and the Office of Public Safety showed no concern for how Shawna's case was neglected in her time of need, nor did they outline system improvements moving forward. This kid ended up in L.A.! I found no evidence that her hometown was looking for her.

The advocacy groups I spoke with that support survivors of sex trafficking were not shocked by the news reports of police officers as pimps. While most officers do not engage in this behavior, veterans in the field know that what we've read in the news is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the culture changes needed, not just within MPD but as a community. The situation cries for a systematic solution. Here are just a few recommendations:

- A protocol is needed to work with NCMEC to report to them every missing youth as they have requested (currently, there is only one teen actively listed as missing from DC),
- More training for all police officers by experts in the field on the complex dynamics of child sex trafficking (and this book our volunteers wanted to share with you is a place to start).
- Johns should be arrested not only under solicitation but charged with statutory rape and child abuse,
- Work with youth-serving nonprofits to collect reports of missing children from possibly reluctant parents, assign 'critical' case statuses appropriately including those children missing from the child welfare system, and provide timely response services to victims and families.
- Child advocacy groups are working on a bill to improve holistically how the problem is addressed and give MPD the support it needs. We hope they will come to the table and work with us to tighten the holes in the safety net.

I deeply appreciate that Chief Lanier has named Commander Hickson to the head of the Youth Investigation Division. A move like that is not done lightly. I look forward to working with him. But I want to caution that a change of leadership alone won't fix the system. I hope he is able make significant improvements to ensure no child slips through the cracks on our watch, especially runaway and homeless youth who are at high risk of being trafficked. I hope that he will work with the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, Fair Girls, Courtney's House, other service providers like ours, and Councilmembers as they develop legislation to address this issue. Thousands of missing and exploited children are counting on him. They are counting on all of us.