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June 27, 2013

The Honorable Mark Stone
California State Assembly
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249

VIA EMAIL: SB (738) Support

Dear Assemblyman Stone:

Crittenton Services for Children and Families, a non-profit focused on serving the needs of troubled youth and families in Southern California, asks for your support of Senate Bill 738 (Yee) which will strengthen services for commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) in our state.

As one of the top destinations for human trafficking, California plays a significant role in how the country decides to address this issue. Currently, minors being trafficked are arrested and moved through the juvenile justice system with little regard to how or why these children are forced onto the streets or websites like backpage.com. This process is fundamentally inappropriate because these children are not of the age where they may legally consent to sex, however we penalize them and accuse them of "selling" sex. Today, other states such as Connecticut and Illinois have aggressively dealt with the issue of human trafficking by understanding that children who are bought and sold must be protected, treated and cared for, and have adopted legislation reflecting this.

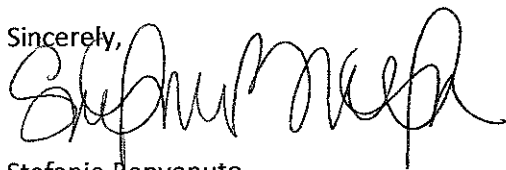
Based on our extensive experience working with the CSEC population, it has been evident that the majority of the children have experienced some level of early childhood trauma, specifically sexual abuse, which has not been adequately assessed and at times even left untreated. As a result, the child's level of traumatization has, more often than not, lead to unconscious and unhealthy efforts to resolve those traumas, resulting in high levels of vulnerability and risk of commercial exploitation later in childhood. Unfortunately, California's current system of regarding these wounded children as criminals fails to assess and comprehensively treat the child and further reinforces their traumas. SB 738, by allowing children in specific circumstances to be shifted from the jurisdiction of the justice system and into the child welfare system can allow the child to recover and, we hope, lead a full and healthy life.

Additionally, the formation of an interagency workgroup as outlined by SB 738 can provide a coordinated, thoughtful response to the appropriateness and effectiveness of services currently provided, while establishing improved policy and programming where applicable. Given what Crittenton staff have seen during our years of treating this population, we are strong advocates of allowing for proper assessment for placement and treatment as deemed appropriate by a highly qualified and CSEC-trained group of specialists. Assessing for proper placement by qualified CSEC clinicians allows for the thorough assessment of the safety of returning an exploited child to their family of origin with comprehensive services, or a determination that suitable placement is best for the child. This can allow for more intensive intervention, treatment and rehabilitation to comprehend and deconstruct their history of trauma as they progress through the healing process and into survivorship. In the same way that the departmental jurisdiction of these children is important to the lens with which we, the public, view them, where they are physically placed as they heal is also a critical component of the process. It is our hope that policy makers and members of the interagency workgroup, will agree that focusing on the safety, stability and recovery of the CSEC population will serve as fundamental guidelines for any future programs and policies.

A child who has experience commercial sexual exploitation is a child in dire need of help. When we remember that the significant majority of this population has a history of sexual abuse and has had contact with the child welfare system, we must recognize that the adults and responsible parties in their lives have routinely failed to protect them from exploitation. SB 738, by establishing policy and recognizing the need for appropriate placements and treatment, will not only help heal the children currently being bought and sold in our very own communities, but assist in preventing children in the future from the same fate.

For these reasons, Crittenton Services requests your “aye” vote on SB 738 when it comes before the Assembly Human Services Committee on July 2nd. Thank you for recognizing the importance of classifying these children as victims and providing them with the support to heal from their trauma. If you have any questions regarding this important legislation, please do not hesitate to contact me at (714) 336-6536.

Sincerely,



Stefanie Benvenuto

Director, Public Policy & Advocacy

Cc: Assembly Human Services Committee