

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)**  
**Ranking member, Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**On the Introduction of the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act**  
**January 27, 2015**

I am proud today to introduce the Leahy-Collins Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. It is deplorable that in the wealthiest country in the world, 1.6 million teenagers live on the streets because they have no home. And we know that those who do not have a safe place to sleep at night are particularly vulnerable to being exploited and trafficked. A recent study found that nearly one in four homeless young people have been victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation. We often talk about human trafficking as an international problem, but the sad truth is that it is a major problem right here at home. It is time we provide the resources to help protect our children from this very real threat.

The Runaway Youth Act, first signed into law in 1974, has proven essential to providing the basic services and resources that runaway and homeless youth need, and our continued support is vital. Thirty-nine percent of the homeless population is under the age of 18, and the average age at which a teen becomes homeless is 14.7 years old. Think about that. The average teen living on the streets is not even old enough to drive. These young people represent our country's future and its optimism, and as a father and a grandfather, I believe that we must do more to address the needs of the 1.6 million homeless youth in our country.

Teens run away and become homeless for myriad reasons. A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study found that 46 percent of homeless youth had run away because of physical abuse and 17 percent because of sexual abuse. Nearly 40 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBT and report leaving home because of a lack of acceptance. By including a new provision that prohibits grantees from denying services based on the sexual orientation or gender identity of the homeless youth, this bill takes important new steps to make sure that we are meeting the needs of this growing and particularly vulnerable population. No young person should be turned away from these essential services.

We have made great strides in recent years in our efforts to combat human trafficking. Most recently, we reauthorized the comprehensive Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a bipartisan bill I introduced and was proud to see enacted as part of the Leahy-Crapo Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act. And last year, we saw historic levels of funding for victims of trafficking, an urgently needed increase that I was proud to support as the most senior member of the Appropriations Committee. But we must not forget the importance of investing in prevention efforts as well, and I was disappointed that Congress failed to pass the bipartisan Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. If we are to make a real difference to end modern day slavery, we must protect those who are most vulnerable and prevent the exploitation in the first place. We cannot simply focus on ending demand and arrest our way out of this problem; we must eliminate the conditions that make these children so vulnerable. That means investing in stable housing and support services for more kids in need; we are not doing enough. I hope that we can finally enact this meaningful bill in 2015.

In addition to the dangers of human trafficking, homeless youth are at greater risk of suicide, unintended pregnancy, and substance abuse. They are less likely to finish school, more likely to enter our juvenile justice system, and are often ill-equipped to find a job. The services authorized by this bill are designed to intervene early and encourage the development of successful, productive young adults.

I have heard from dozens of service providers from across the country, including in my home state of Vermont, that these programs work. I am proud to say that last year, 95 percent of youth receiving services from the Vermont Coalition for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs were able to exit to a safe living situation upon their completion of programming. Without the programs funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, hundreds of thousands of children would be left on the street and vulnerable to exploitation. Congress has an opportunity to respond in a meaningful and historic way.

I thank Senators Collins, Booker, and Ayotte for working with me on this legislation and for joining me as original cosponsors. We have the chance to make a real difference by passing the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. Every day we wait is another night too many children are sleeping on the streets.

I ask unanimous consent that my full statement be printed in the Record.

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