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Advocates say reproductive services 'important' for trafficking victims

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service



A policeman escorts a man detained during a raid on a human trafficking operation near Barcelona, Spain, in late March. (CNS photo/Albert Gea, Reuters)

This story is the fourth in a series on the decision by federal officials to discontinue funding the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services program to assist foreign-born victims of human trafficking. Check back with NCRonline.org every day this week for more stories.

WASHINGTON -- Longtime advocates for victims of human trafficking told a House committee that the government must ensure that females who are trafficked can access all reproductive health services including contraception and abortion.

Addressing the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Dec. 14, Florrie Burke, a consultant to anti-trafficking organizations, and Andrea Powell, executive director of FAIR Girls in Washington, said victims who are raped must be able to determine for themselves what services they need

rather than facing restrictions on care imposed by others.

The hearing was requested by minority Democrats on the committee as part of the congressional probe into the process followed by the Department of Health in Human Services to award grants for services to trafficking victims.

House Republicans maintained during the 80-minute hearing -- as they did Dec. 1 -- that they believe HHS officials violated federal law protecting religious conscience in denying up to \$2.5 million in funding to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services because the church agency would not provide or refer female trafficking victims for contraceptive, abortion or sterilization services.

Grants were awarded under the National Human Trafficking Victim Assistance Program to three other agencies including two whose original applications scored lower than the MRS proposal. Those two agencies initially were not recommended for funding by the staff of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division of the Office of Refugee Resettlement that administers the program within HHS.

Both Powell and Burke disagreed with the policy written into the contract HHS had with MRS for case management services for trafficking victims from April 2006 to October 2011 that allowed the church agency to prohibit the local groups it subcontracted for services to refer clients for reproductive health care that violated church teaching.

Burke said such services were as vital as the need to refer clients for cancer screening, diabetes treatment or heart disease.

"It's not just contraception, abortion or other services, but it's the education that goes along with it, that victims are often young, victims are often undereducated, victims often come with a different primary language and don't really understand their own sexual health, they don't understand the functions of their body. They're very vulnerable to illness and disease," she said.

Powell said her duty as a social worker and victim advocate is to ensure that the full range of services is available to clients.

In response to a question from Rep. Gerald Connolly, D-Va., a Catholic, as to why such services are needed, Powell said, "It's important for their lives."

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"It's not just about whether or not we think they might need it," Powell explained. "These individuals absolutely need the ability to have these referrals."

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., committee chairman, concluded the hearing by saying he was concerned about the process followed in awarding the grants. He described the process as "inherently flawed" because in the end the funding selection was left to an individual administrator rather than being based on the quality of a grant application.

"That is one of the challenges for this committee ... to figure out how the grant process can be honest and legal upfront so that nobody enters knowing that there is a trapdoor at the end and so that from the remaining people who are eligible they receive contracts in a fair and impartial fashion," Issa said.

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