

Andrea MittmanThomas

My Name Is Andrea, Not Angel: A Policy Impact Statement from a Labor and Sex Trafficking Survivor

Executive Summary

Andrea MittmanThomas was trafficked from age eleven through her teenage years and into adulthood. No one recognized it. Not the police. Not the judges. Not the doctors she saw again and again. She did not even recognize it herself until she was in her forties. Today, Andrea is a social worker, a consultant, and the co-chair of a survivor advisory committee. She is also living proof that systems can learn to do better. This statement explains what failed her and what must change so no other child waits decades to learn that what happened to them was a crime, not their fault.

Full Statement

Andrea MittmanThomas was raised in Dyersburg, Tennessee, by her maternal grandparents, the people she has always considered her true parents. They were Pentecostal preachers and missionaries, which meant Andrea grew up inside a sheltered, deeply religious household where the outside world felt very far away. She went from praying in a Pentecostal church pew to being passed between motel rooms before she even understood what the word "survivor" meant. Her life changed dramatically at the age of eleven, when her biological mother returned unexpectedly and took Andrea and her younger sister to live with her in Cleveland, Ohio.

Within just a few months of that move, Andrea experienced severe abuse for the first time. She was physically beaten and then sexually assaulted by one of her mother's friends, and that abuse continued to escalate over several months. While staying at her father's home in Cleveland, she was also sexually abused by a family member and that person's friends. Feeling completely unsafe and utterly unsupported, Andrea made the difficult decision to run away. Within twenty-four hours of leaving, she encountered the individuals who would go on to traffic her.

She was alone and hungry when traffickers approached her, offering food, alcohol, and a place to stay. Knowing she was only eleven years old, they quickly began sexually abusing her as well. Having already endured so much abuse at home, Andrea accepted this new nightmare as her reality. The traffickers never called her by her real name; instead, they called her Angel. In Cleveland, they held so-called swingers parties in motels and hotels, forcing her to dress up for men who paid to have sex with her. They also transported her across state lines, using alcohol and other substances to force her participation in commercial sex while she was still a minor.

Andrea went to the hospital frequently, covered in bruises and suffering from various health issues, but her traffickers always spoke to the doctors themselves, effectively preventing her from ever disclosing what was really happening.

Andrea was also moved from state to state and forced to work long hours in restaurants without receiving any pay. Her traffickers cut her hair and dressed her to appear older, so that employers would not question her lack of identification. She regularly worked twelve to sixteen hour shifts while they collected all of her wages. During this same period, a restaurant manager sexually abused her as well. Andrea attempted to report the abuse by writing a letter to the company's corporate office, but she never received any response.

After several years of restaurant work and forced attendance at parties while she was still a minor, her traffickers offered her money to return to Cleveland, Ohio, in order to secure housing and recruit younger girls. Seeing a potential escape route, Andrea pretended to accept the offer, gave the money away to vulnerable people instead, and became homeless once more. She refused to exploit others in the same way she had been exploited. Eventually, Andrea lived with a man who offered her shelter, and she became pregnant with her son.

While standing on a street corner one day, Andrea was found by her biological mother, father, and stepmother as they traveled to juvenile court for a case related to her. Instead of feeling relief, Andrea was met with their anger, and they took her to the local police station, which then referred her to juvenile court. There, the magistrate judge treated Andrea as a delinquent and her parents as the victims, threatening her with a lengthy prison sentence simply for running away. When Andrea tried to describe her labor and sex trafficking, the judge refused to listen and sent her to a juvenile facility. During her initial medical exam at that facility, both the doctor and an intern sexually assaulted her. Days later, Andrea learned she was pregnant.

Because she was pregnant with her first son and could no longer remain in the juvenile facility, the judge allowed her to return home. Her parents rejected the child, but her stepmother offered some support. Since Andrea could not complete her sentence in the facility and her parents refused to house her if she kept the baby, the state ordered her to a group home. While living at the group home, Andrea gave birth to her son, but the state removed him and placed him with her biological father and stepmother because the group home could not care for children. She was allowed to visit her son only twice a month. After the group home closed, the state moved Andrea to a foster home and then to an independent living program that supported her until she turned twenty-three. When that support ended, she had no safety net at all. Without stable housing, financial support, or any guidance, Andrea once again became vulnerable to exploitative relationships with trafficking dynamics that she still lacked the language to describe. She eventually married, and even then, the trafficking continued.

Andrea did not fully recognize that she had been trafficked until she was in her forties, when a friend invited her to attend a human trafficking conference hosted by the Ohio Attorney

General's Office. During the event, a speaker shared their survivor story, and Andrea began to cry as she realized it mirrored her own experiences. For the first time in her life, she understood that what she had endured was human trafficking. She felt as though she had found her missing piece. That realization marked the true beginning of her healing journey. Andrea attended therapy twice a week and worked hard to understand the trauma she had experienced, as well as its lasting impact on her life. Healing has not been a straight line, but every small step forward has reminded her that she deserved help long before she knew how to ask for it. She also recognized the many ways that trauma had affected her mental and physical health, effects that continue to this day.

Looking back, Andrea can see exactly where prevention could have changed everything. If a single teacher had been trained to notice that an eleven-year-old had stopped coming to school, someone might have asked questions. If a single doctor had been trained to recognize the signs of trafficking during one of her many hospital visits, someone might have pulled her aside and asked her privately if she was safe. If a single police officer or juvenile court worker had been trained to see a victim instead of a delinquent, Andrea might have been placed in a shelter instead of a facility where she was assaulted again.

Prevention does not require a massive new system. It requires training the people who already see children every day to recognize what trafficking actually looks like. In Andrea's case, prevention would have meant someone, anyone, asking her the right question at the right time. That one question could have saved her years of additional trauma. That is what she wants for the children coming up behind her.

Today, Andrea is a social worker who has worked with diverse populations, including individuals experiencing homelessness, substance use, and reentry after incarceration. She has been a social worker since 2006. Currently, she works as a consultant and serves as the co-chair of the Survivor Advisory Committee for the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking in Cleveland. Through this role, Andrea participates in survivor-informed trainings, advocacy efforts, and policy initiatives aimed at preventing trafficking and supporting survivors.

Andrea's experience revealed significant failures across multiple systems. While she was missing as a child, no missing persons report was ever filed. School staff and child welfare agencies failed to question her absence, even though services had previously been involved with her family. When she was sent to juvenile court, the police, juvenile workers, and judge did not identify her as a victim of human trafficking and sexual abuse, nor did the child welfare system. Years later, while Andrea was conducting a training on human trafficking in Cleveland, a healthcare provider approached her and apologized for failing to recognize the signs when Andrea had repeatedly come to the hospital. Andrea holds no resentment toward that provider. Instead, she hopes her story can help improve training, especially on child human trafficking, so that other young people are recognized and supported much earlier.

Andrea also faced significant barriers while rebuilding her life. Housing instability, employment challenges, and a lack of access to basic necessities made it incredibly difficult to leave exploitation permanently. She learned to navigate these systems through trial and error, and she hopes that with more widespread survivor-informed education, others in similar situations will not have to do the same. She received no support from specialized human trafficking service providers who would have better understood her exploitation and healing needs. Instead, her support came from nonspecialized sources such as churches, food banks, and organizations like the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, none of which identified her as a trafficking victim either. Now she works with the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking and partner organizations that provide these specialized resources to survivors.

Although awareness of human trafficking has grown in recent years, Andrea believes many survivors still face the same barriers she encountered. Survivors frequently struggle with housing, employment, criminal records related to their exploitation, and limited access to treatment or support programs. She believes there is a deep need for more reentry assistance, including educational opportunities, to help survivors reintegrate into society. Without stable resources, many remain vulnerable to further exploitation. Andrea believes that if survivor-centered housing, mentorship, and support networks had been available earlier, her own path out of trafficking could have been earlier, safer, and far less traumatic. She was failed by every system meant to protect her, but she is still here fighting so others do not have to survive the same silence.

Andrea has learned not to judge a book by its cover and to extend more grace toward others who are facing mental health challenges and abuse. Her experience made her look at her life differently, parent differently, and pay closer attention to her surroundings. As a social worker, she embraces diversity and listens to vulnerable groups in order to meet them where they are, exactly as she wishes others had done for her.

Andrea hopes that by sharing her story, policymakers and service providers will better understand the realities survivors face. She wants decision-makers to recognize that trafficking occurs in communities across the United States and that survivors' needs are complex and deeply individualized. She hopes policymakers, service providers, and the public will pay attention to the issues survivors struggle with and the conditions that put them in harm's way again. Human trafficking is real, and ignoring it will only cause the situation to grow. Addressing it now is essential. While eradicating human trafficking will not happen overnight, meaningful policy changes will help make a difference. No child should have to wait until their forties to learn that what happened to them was a crime, not their fault.

She calls for:

- Improved survivor-informed professional training so teachers, healthcare providers, social workers, juvenile justice systems, and other frontline professionals can recognize

and respond to the intersectionalities of trafficking, especially labor trafficking, which is often less understood for US citizen survivors. This training should be required annually for all frontline professionals in child welfare, healthcare, schools, and juvenile justice.

- Strengthened coordination between social agencies such as healthcare, social services, and justice systems to prevent individuals from being overlooked or underserved.
- Individualized, survivor-centered services that address intersecting vulnerabilities and diverse needs such as mental health care, substance use treatment, and long-term stability.
- Expanded access to housing and economic stability, including credit assistance and housing opportunities for individuals facing access barriers.
- Ensuring survivors are not penalized for their forced criminality, by making sure systems are educated about this issue so survivors are not arrested for crimes they were forced to commit in the first place, and if they are, allowing access to education, housing, and support services with vacatur and expungement.
- Centering and prioritizing survivor consultants in potential program designs, and increasing survivor committees and councils in policymaking on a local and federal level to increase public awareness that labor and sex trafficking occurs within communities across the United States.

"Her name is Andrea, not Angel. She is living proof that with the right support, survival can become a life worth living."