

Congressional Briefing: Addressing the Mental Health Impact of
Violence and Trauma on Children

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Good morning, everyone. I would like thank Blair Bjellos from Congressman Ted Poe's office and the Victim's Rights Caucus so much. Blair has done a tremendous amount of work assisting us to coordinate this event today. In addition to the Victim's Rights Caucus, the Addiction, Treatment and Recovery Caucus has been very supportive of this briefing as well.

While I am the founder, President & CEO of Witness Justice, I'm speaking to you today on behalf of the Coalition Addressing Trauma, which is a national advocacy collation that formed earlier this year. It includes survivors, consumers, advocates, organizations and we also have government sitting in and observing and informing the Coalition periodically. You'll see at the back of your briefing packet, if you are not familiar with the Coalition or if your organization is not a member of the Coalition yet, you can learn more. The intention is to bring together as many interested parties around the nature and impact of trauma so that we can start to address this in a more collaborative and comprehensive way.

This is a starting point today for all of us to think about where our kids aren't getting the support that they need. Where we are allowing parental rights to supersede the basic human rights of children. Just a few weeks ago the United Nations sited the United States with human rights violations because of the lack of enforcement of protective orders. Policy without enforcement doesn't amount to much for people. We have laws, but they have to be enforced. We have to think about why our kids are stuck in a system that does little to ultimately protect them until the very worst of violence and trauma has taken place.

Another thing I wanted to point out is that our children don't have the emotional maturity and the language skills that adults have. The way that they communicate with us is with their behavior. And so often kids will let out that behavior – their frustration, their pain, their anger – they let it out in school because it is a safe place. And almost always we as teachers, school administrators, parents, community – the way we respond to troubling behavior is in a punitive way. So instead of asking the question of "what's happening with this child?" and "what is this child trying to tell me?", we are saying "what's wrong with them?" and we're really quick to medicate them. And we're really quick to label them as "bad", or "troubled", or "ill." We really need to think about that, because if we can take a step back and really look at what is happening with children and start to understand their behavior as communication, then I think we really have a chance at intervention and support for

those kids. It really needs to happen. You know?! Our kids are sending us warning signs and we have to see them as such.

I also want to encourage everyone to really think about how we can begin to address these issues in policy, in administration, in organizations, in community and in families – what’s happening with our kids, and this public health crisis of trauma in our children’s lives needs to be done in a coordinated way. It can’t all be done in policy. It can’t all be done in government – certainly not with our federal budget in its current state. So we need to think about how we can all work together to make this better, because if we don’t intervene and change things and swing the pendulum back to a healthy place for our children, we are setting up a lifetime of struggles, obstacles and illness for our kids.

(partial remarks - the full video and transcript was not available)