



Every 12 minutes, a child goes missing. One bill can make all the difference

By **Darcy Olsen**

At 13, Alicia Kozakiewicz snuck out of her house to meet a “friend” she’d met online. He wasn’t a friend. He abducted her, chained her in a basement, and tortured her.

Alicia’s family, neighbors, and the FBI turned the world upside down to find her, and within days, she was pulled out of that basement alive.

Anaiah Walker’s story began the same way. She snuck out, too. The difference is that no one tore the world apart for her because Anaiah went missing from a foster home for abused children. What passed for a search was a name in a database and a few flyers. Some time later, Anaiah was found dead on the median of Interstate 10.

I wish I could tell you that Anaiah’s case was unusual. But indifference to children who go missing from foster care is common. Predators hunt these children, knowing many won’t be missed or searched for.

Withelma “T” Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, who spent 18 years in foster care and was trafficked from age 10 to 17, told Congress: “These exploiters go without fear of punishment due to the lack of attention when young people from this population go missing. No one looks for us.”

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, 70% of trafficked children were first exploited while missing from foster care.

How to reduce sex-trafficking is not a mystery — it is a choice.

A child in care goes missing every 12 minutes. In 2014, Congress recognized this crisis and required states to report any child missing from care to law enforcement within 24 hours.

But nine years later, a 2023 federal audit examined more than 74,000 missing foster care episodes and estimated that 34,869 were never reported. Agencies failed these children tens of thousands of times.

At the Center for the Rights of Abused Children, we've won urgent searches for missing children. In Arizona, we pushed reforms to make a child's photo available immediately and require monthly reports to the governor. In Missouri, we ensured children are counted as "missing," not written off as "runaways."

But even the strongest laws won't protect children if agencies ignore them. That's why every child in state care needs a lawyer.

An attorney is essential for enforcement. The moment a child vanishes, an attorney can request an emergency hearing and seek court orders to compel the agency to disclose search efforts and order more. The attorney can monitor the case to ensure searching continues until the child is found and brought to safety.

After recovery, an attorney can also advocate for medical examinations, forensic interviews, and specialized placements, which many child victims never receive. Finally, the attorney can seek accountability if the agency violated statutes.

One of the greatest values of counsel is continuity. Caseworkers change. Placements change. Judges rotate. The attorney often remains the one consistent adult following the case, so if the child disappears, someone who actually knows the child notices and has the duty and authority to act.

The effect is measurable: children with attorneys exit care for safe homes up to three times faster. And a safe, permanent family is the strongest protection against exploitation.

In 2018, the Trump administration made federal matching funds available to states that provide children with attorneys. The money is there; what's missing is the will to use it. Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon's (D-PA) Right to Representation Act, pending before Congress, would close that gap, guaranteeing every child an attorney to enforce these basic rights.

Alicia had people who refused to stop searching. Anaiah had no one. The difference between them was never the danger — it was whether anyone was fighting to keep them safe. We can make sure someone always is.

Darcy Olsen fostered 10 children and adopted four. She is the founder and CEO of the [Center for the Rights of Abused Children](#).

Source: [Washington Examiner](#), "Every 12 Minutes, a Child Goes Missing. One Bill Can Be the Difference Between Rescue and Trafficking," by Darcy Olsen, July 5, 2026.