

TESTIMONY

of

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UNITED STATES SENATE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

“End It: The Fight to End Modern Slavery”

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, I am honored to appear

before you today to express my conviction that we can end modern slavery during our lifetimes.

I want to express my particular gratitude to Chairman Corker for his vision, courage and tenacity, Senator Cardin, and the members of this Committee, for the work you did in a bipartisan way that made the End Modern Slavery Initiative a reality. It will change the world.

As this Committee has reported, at least 27 million people, including children, suffer as a result of forced labor and sexual exploitation. The leading experts tell us that this is a problem in more than 165 countries. But it is not just a problem somewhere else. It is also a problem in this country.

While it's important to know the numbers and statistics, it can make this problem seem distant. However, this is an issue that touches real people's lives. As a father of two young children, it is the stories of survivors and their resilience that have stayed with me and motivated me to do this work.

Let me give an example of a survivor I was thinking about today as I came to Capitol Hill for this hearing. In 2015, we learned of Amy (not her real name), a 15-year old girl in Oakland who met her trafficker online and struck up a friendship. One day after school, she agreed to meet him in person and runaway. As soon as they were alone together, the man revealed he was a pimp and that Amy had to now sell herself for sex, otherwise he would beat her. He sexually assaulted Amy and forced her to start posting her own ads on online escort sites.

Several days later, law enforcement officials were able to locate Amy and set up a "date." Once in the room, they revealed they were law enforcement and there to help her. She said she wanted to go home and she helped the officers arrest her pimp. He is now facing over 40 years in prison. Amy is back home with her family and receiving services.

Sadly, Amy's story is not an isolated instance. It occurs every day, not just in this country, but all around the world. These are horrible situations and every situation is different.

One thing that is unique about Amy's story is the short amount of time it took officers to find her. While our goal is that no one falls prey to trafficking ever, if and when they do, we must have a rapid response. When children are being trafficked and exploited, time is of the essence. There is not a moment to waste. And this is where technology can help.

In the past, a typical trafficking case could take months, if not years, to identify and locate a minor victim due to the volume of escort ads posted daily in the United States. Our data points to over 150,000 escort ads posted every day that are constantly being taken up and down on various sites. This reality, in combination with the fact that

traffickers move victims from city to city, makes it extremely difficult to find and identify any individual.

Our solution to this challenge is Spotlight. Spotlight is a web-based application we built with our partners (Digital Reasoning, the McCain Institute, Google, and others) to improve trafficking investigations and increase the number of victims identified and connected with help resources.

While I can't disclose exactly how it works since it is utilized by law enforcement across the country, I can say it draws from publicly available data and using natural language processing and machine learning to help surface likely minors being sold online. This technology has existed for years, and yet now we are putting it to work for some of our most vulnerable children.

And is it working? Yes. We know this because more than 4,000 officers from over 900 agencies across this country are using it and getting real results. In the last twelve months, it's helped identify over 6,000 trafficking victims in the U.S., 2,000 of which were minors. It has also led to the identification of over 2,200 traffickers.

Before Spotlight, if officers were lucky, they may have found Amy in a few months. With Spotlight, it took 3 days. This is where technology can be instrumental - in shrinking the time it takes to reach the victims in these situations.

Amy's story shows us the power of using technology in the fight against trafficking:

1 -- Technology Means Faster Identification. While invest in trafficking prevention is paramount, we also need the tools to identify victims when trafficking occurs. Amy is one person, but she is not alone. Technology allows for first responders to move faster and reach more victims in half the amount of time. Our users report that Spotlight has reduced investigative time by up to 60%. This means officers can spend more time away from a computer and out in the field trying to make contact with those who may want help.

2. Technology is adaptable. One of the things we know about all types of trafficking, is how quickly the landscape changes. This is particularly true online, and can put law enforcement at a disadvantage to tech savvy perpetrators. One site goes down, another one pops up in its place.

However, technology is nimble and can adjust to these kinds of changes in a matter of seconds, ensuring we don't miss a beat. We also run our nation wide survivor survey, where we ask survivors of trafficking to describe what role technology played in their exploitation to better understand where the points of intervention are and how we can improve our response. In this way, we are getting the full picture of how technology is being used to exploit these victims, so we can create effective tools to fight back.

3. Technology is scalable and inexpensive to replicate globally. If you build a viable tool, you don't have to be constantly re-inventing the wheel, making it is relatively easy to adapt and scale globally. For us we've seen this both on the Spotlight, and with our work on the Dark Web. Spotlight is now being used in Canada, and we have great interest from the UK. Separately, our dark web tool (which I will discuss later) is being utilized by an international working group who focus on Child Sexual Abuse Material investigations in the Dark Web (over 40 users from 8 countries).

Using technology to fight the sexual exploitation of children is what we aim to do at Thorn, a nonprofit organization I co-founded several years ago. We made a commitment to innovate, to develop new technology tools to better respond to and address these problems, and then to put those tools in the hands of those best positioned to use them.

I refuse to live in a world where any person must remain in a heinous abuse situation simply because existing technology hasn't been utilized to find them.

This model has taught us a lot about what we need to be effective but we still have a lot to learn. Spotlight is just one example of our commitment at Thorn to bring new, cutting-edge tools to the fight against modern slavery and human trafficking. Let me mention one more.

Dark Web:

In the mid-1990s, the United States Naval Research Laboratory created a new tool, which enabled political dissidents and journalists to use the internet anonymously, thus avoiding retaliation by repressive regimes. This was done for high-minded and noble reasons.

Yet, as with so many other innovations, there have been unintended consequences. Political dissidents are not the only ones using the internet anonymizing tools we created. They are also being used by criminals and exploiters, including human traffickers, weapons traffickers, drug traffickers, child exploiters and many others.

As a result today, the anonymous Dark Web has become the open market for the trading of the worst of the worst child sexual abuse content. And there is no way to "shut it down." Now that the technology exists, it will also be out there.

Therefore, the way you have to attack this problem, is by matching the level of technical sophistication with your response. Initially, the primary investigative techniques were either infiltration or waiting for offenders to make a mistake. At Thorn, we are changing this paradigm by enlisting the best and brightest minds in technology to help us get out in front of these perpetrators instead of always playing catch up.

Working alongside some of the top minds in technology, as well as law enforcement, we

have developed a Dark Web investigations tool that can aid investigators in identifying and rescuing victims in the Dark Web faster than ever before.

Just in the first six months of testing our beta tool, it has helped identify 37 children from around the world who were victims of child sexual abuse and whose abuse material has been shared in communities on the Dark Web. A number of these children were under 5 years old.

Recommendations

Our efforts to help solve the complex problems of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation have taught us some powerful lessons. I'd like to offer three recommendations:

1: More public-private partnerships are needed (Investment in Technology). At Thorn, we are a concrete example of what working with the public and private sector looks like. We've benefited from the expertise of leading technology companies like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and AWS. We've also had the privilege to work with law enforcement and other government agencies at the local, national, and international level that are on the frontlines and are eager to improve their technical tools. We need support from both industry and government to keep doing this work.

Our tool Spotlight is a great example of a public/private partnership. Because of the McCain Institute's initial investment in Spotlight, we were able to partner with Digital Reasoning, (a technology company based in Tennessee), to build the tool and get it in the hands of officers across the country. Our grassroots work with law enforcement has helped us bring Spotlight to over 4,000 law enforcement agents in over 1,000 agencies in all 50 states.

A detective in New Mexico wrote us, "I cannot overstate the importance of Spotlight in these investigations. Due to caseloads, we would be unable to identify most of these victims by manually searching their information due to time constraints."

While this approach of private and nonprofit funding allowed us to build the tool, it is not sustainable over time. We need government to join us as investment partners and support the ongoing innovation needed to stay ahead of perpetrators as well as invest in the technical support for law enforcement agents that are working to protect our kids.

The End Modern Slavery Initiative Act, championed by Chairman Corker and this Committee, shows how the US government can be a leader on this issue. Through this initiative, the US government can actively invite the best and brightest in the technology field to join us in this fight and open a dialogue towards identifying and implementing technical solutions around the world. And, by demonstrating your financial commitment, this Committee is showing the world that the United States is serious about ending slavery in our lifetime.

2. We must address the “pipeline” and aftercare: We need to even better understand how children become vulnerable to this crime in the first place. For instance, if you want to think about preventing domestic sex trafficking in the U.S., you must examine the foster care system and the data around the correlation between foster care and trafficking. It is absolutely dismal. Many organizations, agencies, and reports have documented the intersection between involvement in the child welfare system and child sex trafficking; between 50 and 98 percent of identified child victims of commercial sexual exploitation have previously been involved with the child welfare system. Therefore if we are to address trafficking in the U.S., we must look hard at the foster care system as a place of critical intervention.

And while our tool helps identify victims who are being exploited, what happens to these survivors once they are out of that abusive situation? All too often trafficking survivors find no options for rescue and rehabilitation. We must change that. There are some remarkable non-profits and government programs that offer direct services to survivors in the U.S., and all of them operate on a shoestring budget. Robust aftercare services prevent re-victimization and can be a critical investment of the End Modern Slavery Initiative Act as you seek to measurably reduce the prevalence of slavery around the world.

3. We must address demand, the buyers. Human trafficking and modern slavery are such large problems today for a basic reason. They are low-risk and highly profitable. In the fight against sex trafficking, the perpetrators are often the unsuspected man next door. We have to create real deterrence and reduce demand by holding the customers accountable. And in regards to labor trafficking, we need more transparency in business supply chains and accountability for companies that are sourcing supplies and labor unethically. Members of this Committee have helped advance efforts to protect victims of labor trafficking by regulating foreign labor recruiters and introducing legislation to hold companies accountable. President Obama’s Executive Order seeking to eliminate trafficking in federal contracts showed us that change is possible, but we have more work to do.

Conclusion

Thank you for holding this hearing on this issue. Too often it is ignored and it takes courage to confront an issue that represents the worst of humanity.

However, in working together to “End It” we also see the best sides of humanity. Because this committee has worked in a bipartisan way, the End Modern Slavery Initiative Act has now been signed into law by President Obama. I congratulate you on putting the interests of vulnerable children and adults ahead of politics.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership. And thank you for the opportunity to

appear before you today and to add my voice and that of Thorn to your historic effort to end modern slavery and touch the lives of millions of children and adults around the world. We stand ready to assist.

Thank you.