

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Bonamici (OR-01)
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
"Protecting Missing and Exploited Children"
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Tuesday, February 6, 2024 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Chairman, Bean, and thank you Ms. Delaune, for your leadership and testimony today. I appreciate that we are addressing an issue that demands our attention *and* bipartisan action.

Every child deserves a safe, loving home to have their basic needs met.

And when a child goes missing or suffers abuse, families experience unimaginable pain and horror. And for children, the trauma is much worse. Many survivors of exploitation or abuse fear showing their face, socializing, or even leaving the home.

This pain has multiplied in recent years. We have seen a disturbing rise in reported exploitation and child abuse cases, particularly online, as the Chairman was saying. For example, in 2023, NCMEC received a staggering 36 million reports of child sexual exploitation from public and electronic service providers like Apple, Facebook, and Google to its CyberTipline.

That's almost 100 thousand tips a day.

Unfortunately, more than 6,700 of these reports were from my home state of Oregon. These reports include videos, photos, and other heinous content containing child sexual abuse material, and materials intended to entice, traffic, and abuse minors.

I recently visited Amani Center, it's in St. Helens, Oregon. As a Child Advocacy Center, the staff at Amani provide Forensic Child Abuse Assessments and support for children and their families who may have been affected by abuse or neglect. And during my visit I heard about the particular challenges that the Amani Center faces serving primarily rural communities. This visit reaffirmed my commitment that Congress can, and should, do more to help save lives by providing the investment and improvements needed to prevent child abuse and neglect, and to help families flourish.

So, today, these issues have become more complex and challenging, making our work even more critical. Cell phones and other technology play a crucial role in improving communication between parents and children, often times allowing parents to know the whereabouts of their children.

But that same technology is also a gateway for sexual perpetrators on social media to have unfettered access to our children. Artificial intelligence can help search for and identify problems, but privacy issues add a layer of complication.

We know that the NCMEC has reported an exponential growth in reports of online enticement, including sextortion--growing from 80,000 in 2022 to 186,000 in 2023.

We know that online providers are required by law to disclose cases of child sexual exploitation. They are, however, not required to proactively monitor or remove sexually abusive or exploitive content from their platforms. Needless to say, this creates significant gaps in protecting students online. And as we saw from last week's Senate Judiciary Hearing, these companies are not able to adequately address the exploitation of children on their platforms.

Vulnerable youth are at a heightened risk of endangerment. Children of color are overrepresented in missing children's cases. From 2016 to 2020, 31 percent of children reported missing to NCMEC were Black, despite making up only 14 percent of the U.S. population. And additionally, as we've discussed in this committee before, LGBTQI+ youth face disproportionate rates of experiencing homelessness, often caused by fleeing abuse or rejection by family members. No child should be in harm's way or exploited because of who they are or who they love.

Members on both sides of the aisle have long agreed that NCMEC is essential to protecting and supporting exploited children as well as restoring hope for parents and loved ones. And today, NCMEC is working diligently to keep pace with innovative technology and get ahead of evolving threats to our children's safety.

And Ms. Delaune, under your leadership, NCMEC has implemented new programs, such as Take It Down; a wonderful program I must say. This program is a very important and certainly necessary tool to combat the growing problem of online child sexual exploitation by assisting families and survivors with removing sexually explicit images of children from the internet. Thank you for that program.

You should be able to count on Congress for the support you need to continue this critical work, and frankly, it is unacceptable that we have let NCMEC's authorization lapse.

My colleagues Representative Courtney and of course Subcommittee Chair Bean have introduced the *Missing Children's Assistance Reauthorization Act of 2023*, which makes several improvements to NCMEC and, importantly, reauthorizes NCMEC's grant program. I am proud to cosponsor this bill and call on my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to support this legislation and help it move to the full House for a vote.

NCMEC is also an important partner in supporting runaway youth. Support of both the National Runaway Safeline and the expansion of evidence-based practices and interventions for families will allow our nation to better support youth who are at the greatest risk of running away or experiencing homelessness. I look forward to also discussing my bipartisan, bicameral Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act.

The bottom line is that protecting the safety of our nation's children requires all of us to work together, and I know we can. Congress must fulfill its duty to reauthorize critical programs like the *Missing Children's Assistance Act*, which funds NCMEC. The work of NCMEC is too critical to be caught up in the dysfunction of Congress.

So, I look forward to continuing to work with NCMEC and all of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to protect missing and exploited children.

Thank you again for being here and I yield back the balance of my time.