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“Listening to Victims of Child Sex Trafficking” Briefing

Remarks by  
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Thank you, Chairman Smith and Congressman Cohen, the U.S. Helsinki Commission and the Victims’ Rights Caucus, for keeping the spotlight on this critical issue of child sex trafficking.

The victimization endured by this man as a child is heartbreaking.

Shared Hope International has been working to develop responses to sex trafficking, restore victims and prevent victimization for fourteen years. In 2006–2007, under a grant from the U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, Shared Hope researched sex trafficking markets in four countries with the goal of finding commonalities to help define programs on an issue basis rather than a regional basis. The Netherlands was one of the countries.

Demand for illegal commercial sex was—and is—the commonality, and became the title of this research. Another commonality was the exploitation of children through child sex trafficking, defined as the giving of anything of value in exchange for the prostitution, sexual performance or pornography of a child under 18.

Child sex trafficking and child sex tourism are happening in all parts of the world and the reason is that demand exists for the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Focusing on the findings in the Netherlands illustrates the scope of the problem. Shared Hope found that legalized prostitution led to increased demand and consequently a need for more supply; but there are a limited number of adults willing to enter the prostitution “profession.” The deficiency is filled with trafficking victims.

The ban on brothels in the Netherlands was lifted in 2000. Just a few years later, the Amsterdam City Council recognized the dangers of trafficking, deciding to close 100 of the 350 prostitution windows in the official Red Light District. Amsterdam’s Mayor Cohen stated, “Almost five years after the lifting of the brothel ban, we have to acknowledge that the aims of the law have not been reached. Lately, we’ve received more and more signals that abuse still continues, the police admit we are in the midst of modern slavery.”

In 2003, there were 257 registered victims of human trafficking. In that year, Amsterdam’s city Council decided to close the street prostitution zones where abuse and criminal activity were rampant. A 2004 media piece reported that a public opinion poll taken in the wake of the resignation of a council member after admitting he had bought prostitution in the street zone being closed, revealed 73% of citizens believed that public officials should not be stigmatized for buying prostitution and 63% believed the council member’s actions were a private matter that should not have led to his resignation.

In 2004 about 8,000 prostitutes worked in Amsterdam alone—more than 2/3 were of foreign origin. In 2005, Dutch police received more than 600 reports of women who may have been forced into prostitution and 400 women contacted anti-trafficking organizations for assistance. In 2007, there were 343 registered victims of sex trafficking in 2007; 25% were underage.

At the time of our research in 2006–2007, there was reportedly no police presence between 12 am and 6 am in the official Red Light District in Amsterdam, a time which one trafficking victim called “a black market” of prostitution when children became readily available. Only 5-6 police officers worked in the entire Amsterdam Red Light District; there was no capacity for investigating the illegal trafficking occurring. This was an iceberg with legal prostitution at the top masking the vast illegal activity beneath.

The Dutch Criminal Code article 250a in 2005 extended jurisdiction to reach citizens committing child sex tourism, that is, sexual exploitation of a child outside the Netherlands; this mirrors the U.S. PROTECT Act that has been used successfully to combat child sex tourism perpetrated by American citizens. At the same time, in the Netherlands, a 2005 news report interviewed a former vice officer in the Red Light District of Amsterdam who reported that two primary groups of pimps worked the Red Light District: “the loverboys” and “the Turks.” He reported that law enforcement officers were given just three months to complete investigations—a wholly insufficient amount of time to investigate these complicated crimes.

Shared Hope International partnered with the Scarlet Cord working in outreach and services to trafficking victims in Amsterdam. They identified “the loverboy” problem early and developed programs to bring into the schools to prevent the recruitment of youth. The “loverboy” pimping method is very similar to modern trafficking in the U.S. and other countries, relying on emotional bondage rather than physical force. In our research in the Netherlands, victims reported also that “magic” was used to entice them.

But child sex trafficking is not limited to the Netherlands, or any one country. And a “weak link” in the global dragnet and safety net will prevent us from protecting the victims and would-be victims.

Traffickers rely on their ability to frighten a child into silence or the reluctance of adults to listen when children speak about sexual exploitation. It is imperative that the justice system be ready to listen to allegations and to thoroughly investigate them.

Shared Hope International has identified promising practices stemming from our concentrated efforts of the last five years in the U.S. to develop proper responses to child sex trafficking; some of these are happening in other countries already and all of them are transferable to those looking for responses:

- The presence of School Resource Officers within high schools builds trust and comfort between children and law enforcement, making it harder for traffickers to convince children that law enforcement is to be feared and distrusted.
- Education at all levels of the justice system—from investigation to trial—will lead to more identifications of trafficking victims and better responses.
- Above all, victim-centered approaches to interviewing and investigation are critical to a child’s confidence to disclose their victimization. A few examples include:

The Dallas Police Department High Risk Victim (HRV) Unit flags the file of any repeat runaway to funnel the case to the HRV Unit where all of the officers are trained in trafficking identification and forensic child interviewing.

Gang Units, like the Fairfax County Gang Unit in Northern VA, are being trained in sex trafficking identification and victim interviewing that can separate the victim from the influence and gag control of the gang.

Human trafficking task forces across the country bring together service providers and law enforcement to ensure victims are supported and encouraged to seek justice.

Victim witness coordinators in the majority of federal law enforcement offices ensure the victim is supported and heard through the investigation and trial process.

Shared Hope International has developed the Protected Innocence Challenge which includes a framework of laws for effective responses to child sex trafficking. The framework gives credit to those states that have laws providing for victim protections and support through the investigation and trial process. Thirty-four states currently have some protections and all are being encouraged to enact more laws ensuring child victims are heard and protected.

Finally, attacking demand—the root of the problem—leads to corroboration of a victim's complaint, less reliance on the victim's testimony, and reduction in the number of children exploited. Resources and prioritization of fighting demand are critical.

Child sex trafficking is a threat to our society's health, and is truly a national and international security threat allowing organized crime to prey on the most vulnerable in our communities. Until we all, as a global community, and individually within our nations, our state, our cities, get serious about stopping the demand, this fight has no end.

Thank you for continuing to keep this issue at the forefront.