

TESTIMONY

of

JOHN D. RYAN

PRESIDENT AND CEO

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN

for the

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY
EDUCATION**

**“PROTECTING AMERICA’S YOUTH: AN UPDATE FROM
THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN”**

July 15, 2014

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I welcome the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the programs of The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to protect our nation's children and diminish the threat of child abduction and child sexual exploitation.

NCMEC was created as a private, non-profit organization in 1984 and designated by Congress to serve as the national clearinghouse on issues relating to missing and exploited children. In April of this year, NCMEC commemorated 30 years of operation during which we have handled more than four million calls for assistance to our 24/7 toll-free Call Center; distributed more than 589,000 individual missing child posters; helped parents and law enforcement on more than 208,000 missing child cases; assisted in the recovery of more than 196,000 missing children; coordinated the secondary distribution of AMBER Alerts, leading to the recovery of 688 children; trained over 305,000 law enforcement, criminal justice and healthcare professionals; received and processed more than 2.6 million CyberTipline reports of suspected child sexual exploitation; and reviewed more than 115 million images and videos of apparent child pornography to assist law enforcement's efforts to identify and rescue these victimized children.

NCMEC's success is a testament to Congress' unwavering commitment to the work NCMEC does, and in particular to this Committee's support as we continue expanding our public-private partnerships to help protect children from abduction and exploitation and introduce new prevention initiatives to educate parents, teachers and communities on how to keep children safer.

NCMEC's work with missing children is the historical core of our organization. Our work began in response to a series of tragic missing child cases, including the 1979 disappearance of 6-year-old Etan Patz in New York, the murder of 29 children and young adults in Atlanta in the early 1980s and the 1981 abduction and murder of 6-year-old Adam Walsh in Florida. As a movement emerged to create a national coordinated response to missing child cases, Congress enacted the Missing Children Act in 1982. The official opening of NCMEC two years later in 1984, and

Congress' authorization for NCMEC to serve as the national resource center and clearinghouse on missing and exploited children, enabled us to grow into the leading nonprofit organization in the U.S. working with federal, state and local government agencies, law enforcement, private industry, other non-profit organizations, educational and social service entities, communities, families and the professionals who serve them to fulfill 22 operational functions Congress has designated for NCMEC (42 U.S.C. § 5773). These functions include our newest initiatives to provide information and technical assistance to state and local educational agencies and state clearinghouses, especially relating to foster children missing from state care and missing children at risk for sex trafficking.

NCMEC's Missing Children Division works each case of a missing child on an individual basis to provide coordinated resources and technical assistance to law enforcement and support for the family of the missing child. No child is ever forgotten – no matter how long they have been missing. NCMEC recognizes that each type of missing child case, whether a family abduction, runaway or non-family abduction, requires a different approach and resources to provide the best chance of quickly recovering a child. NCMEC's 30 years of experience on missing child cases has taught us that children who run away, especially children who run away from state care, are particularly vulnerable to harm, including sex trafficking. We also have learned that children with special needs are especially at risk and often benefit from unique search protocols when they wander from safe environments. NCMEC has responded to what we have learned about these two particularly vulnerable populations of missing children by creating unique protocols and awareness programs to assist law enforcement on these cases.

As part of its work to combat child sex trafficking, NCMEC assists the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice on the Innocence Lost National Initiative. This initiative creates regional and local task forces to conduct "Operation Cross Country" sweeps and provide ongoing assistance in trafficking cases. Operation Cross Country VIII concluded on June 23, 2014 with the recovery of 168 child sex trafficking victims and the arrest of 281 suspected traffickers. The youngest child

recovered was just 11 years old and this year, for the first time, boys were among the victimized children recovered. To date Operation Cross Country has recovered more than 3,400 children who have been sexually exploited and sold for sex. NCMEC's primary role in the Innocence Lost Initiative is to serve as a clearinghouse for information about children who are exploited through sex trafficking; to provide analytical and technical assistance to law enforcement investigating these cases; and to provide case management support when we have a missing child who is being trafficked for sex.

Our experience with child sex trafficking cases shows this is a complex issue not susceptible to a single solution. The scope of the problem is difficult to accurately quantify due to the reluctance of victims to self-report and other challenges faced by law enforcement in measuring the incidence of this crime. Based on the case data NCMEC receives in our clearinghouse role, we know that approximately 81 percent of missing child reports to NCMEC involve endangered runaways; 1 out of 7 endangered runaways reported to NCMEC in 2013 were likely sex trafficking victims; and 67 percent of these children were in state care when they ran.

Because of the unique vulnerabilities of runaways and children missing from state care, NCMEC created our Child Sex Trafficking Team to provide dedicated and comprehensive analytical services to law enforcement on cases of missing children who may be linked to sex trafficking. One recent initiative is the creation of an introductory training program titled Child Sex Trafficking: Awareness & Response directed to law enforcement, child welfare agencies and other service providers. As an illustration of NCMEC's public-private partnership, this course was developed with federal funds and the first in-person deployment of the training in California was underwritten by a private donor.

NCMEC knows children recovered from sex trafficking often have only the clothes they are wearing. To provide these child victims with basic items they will need during the first hours and days of their recovery, we recently started providing "Hope Bags" to law enforcement and victim

coordinators to provide to recovered victims. Each Hope Bag contains a change of clothes and basic toiletry necessities. NCMEC is proud of our efforts to combat child sex trafficking, but more can be done, including: (1) comprehensive, widely-available training for educators, child welfare agencies, medical professionals, law enforcement, parents and community organizations on identifying and responding to children victimized, or at risk for victimization, by sex trafficking; (2) reporting of children missing from care by state child welfare agencies to law enforcement and then NCMEC; and (3) creation of a single source of comprehensive, current information on resources available nationwide for families and victims of child sex trafficking.

Another one of NCMEC's new initiatives relates to the unique dangers that arise when children with special needs wander, or elope, from safe environments. A recent CDC study estimated that as many as 1 in 68 children may be identified with an autism spectrum disorder. Because nearly half of children with autism will wander from a safe environment and more than one-third of children who wander are considered nonverbal, the safe recovery of a child with autism presents unique challenges for families, schools and caretakers, law enforcement and first responders. Recognizing the special endangerments that arise when a child with special needs goes missing, NCMEC has partnered with other non-profit organizations to create special search protocols and checklists for first responders and co-produce PSAs on missing children with autism. NCMEC is encouraged by the interest law enforcement and first responders have shown in NCMEC's special needs initiatives, but we know more can be done to promote public engagement and awareness of these issues among service providers, schools, caretakers and others who interact with special needs children.

NCMEC also has multiple programs to assist law enforcement, families, child victims and the professionals who serve them on cases of sexually exploited children. Our Exploited Children Division has two core programs to facilitate the reporting of child sexual abuse content and help identify current child victims and prevent future victimization. NCMEC's CyberTipline[®] is the

national mechanism for members of the public and electronic service providers to report suspected child sexual exploitation (18 USC § 2258A). In the 15 years since the CyberTipline was created, NCMEC has received and processed more than 2.6 million reports in eight categories: (1) possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography; (2) online enticement of children for sexual acts; (3) child sex trafficking; (4) sex tourism involving children; (5) extrafamilial child sexual molestation; (6) unsolicited obscene material sent to a child; (7) misleading domain names; and (8) misleading words or digital images on the Internet. NCMEC staff review, add value and then make the reports available to law enforcement in appropriate jurisdictions for their potential review and investigation. Reports are triaged continuously to ensure that reports of children who may be in imminent danger get first priority. The number of CyberTipline reports continues to increase exponentially, from 326,310 in 2011; to 415,650 in 2012; to 505,280 in 2013.

NCMEC's Child Victim Identification Program serves as the central U.S. repository for information related to child victims depicted in sexually exploitive images and videos. Since CVIP was established in 2002, CVIP staff has reviewed more than 115 million child pornography images and videos to assist in law enforcement's efforts to identify children depicted in these images. To date, law enforcement has notified NCMEC of nearly 6,000 identified children, but we know there are many thousands of child victims who have yet to be identified and/or recovered, and there are new victims every day. The number of images forwarded to CVIP for review continues to increase dramatically. Last month alone, CVIP analysts received nearly 2.4 million images/videos for review. As NCMEC handles an increasing number of CyberTipline reports and CVIP requests for review of images, we believe it is important to ensure prosecutors and law enforcement have adequate tools to combat those who commercially profit from the online sexual exploitation of children and that children whose sexual abuse images continue to be distributed online are eligible for adequate recovery for the harm they continue to suffer.

In addition to the case management and analytical support NCMEC provides, we also offer

support to families whose child may be missing or a victim of sex trafficking or another form of sexual exploitation. These services are facilitated by NCMEC's master-level trained mental health and child welfare professionals. NCMEC also manages two voluntary initiatives to help families. NCMEC's Family Advocacy Outreach Network is a referral system of treatment professionals experienced in treating child victims of sexual abuse and other trauma from across the country who work with NCMEC to provide ongoing crisis management and therapy, including in-person intervention, to families and recovered victims on a sliding fee or pro-bono basis. NCMEC also supports families through trained volunteers as part of Team HOPE (Help Offering Parents Empowerment), a volunteer group of parents and family members who have experienced a missing or sexually exploited child or who have a child who is still missing and who provide peer support to other families.

NCMEC also provides reunification assistance when a child is recovered and families need crucial assistance in reintegrating the child back into the home. In addition to emotional support, NCMEC supports the physical reunification of recovered children and their families by administering the Victim Reunification Travel Program funded by the Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime and by working with private transportation partners to facilitate free domestic travel for reunification. This program also enables NCMEC to provide funds to families who must travel to reunite with their recovered child or attend a custody hearing in another country in the case of an international family abduction.

In 30 years of work, it has become clear to us that one of the first steps in protecting children is educating not only children, but also their families, teachers and communities about safety risks. To address this key priority, NCMEC continues to expand its safety and prevention programs for families, teachers and community leaders on child abduction, child sexual exploitation and Internet safety. NCMEC's main education program is the NetSmartz[®] Workshop, an interactive, educational safety resource for children ages five to 17. Through a series of age-appropriate games,

cartoons, videos, worksheets, safety pledges, and grade-specific handouts and teaching curriculums, NetSmartz prepares children to be safer online, especially when confronted with cyberbullying, inappropriate content, sexting, enticement and revealing too much personal information. Our safety programming is created to enable parents and educators to easily select particular aspects of the NetSmartz materials to share with children depending on time constraints and the child's age. NetSmartz has been successful at reaching a wide audience so far – over 5.2 million visits to NCMEC's NetSmartz websites and over 460,000 individual resources distributed – and NCMEC is always seeking new ways to expand its prevention messaging to those who have the most contact with children.

For example, one of NCMEC's newest initiatives, KidSmartz, will capitalize on our private-public partnerships to offer new abduction prevention and safety lessons to children in grades K-5. KidSmartz is set to launch this summer as a resource for teachers and parents/guardians to help children understand safety risks, learn about self-protection and feel empowered to report attempted abductions or other threatening behavior they may encounter on or offline. Because NCMEC's data indicates that approximately one third of attempted abductions occur to children between 10 and 14 years old who are traveling to/from school or a school-related activity, programs like KidSmartz are crucial to targeting school-age children and their parents/guardians and teachers for prevention education.

NCMEC has worked directly with nearly 15,000 schools and school districts in all 50 states to provide teachers with a vast array of no-cost materials and presentations, including safety pledges, interactive presentations, tip sheets, activity cards and other age and grade specific handouts. One teacher from Naples, Fla. recently told us: "I am the tech teacher at my school and used your site to teach my first and second graders about Internet safety. They loved your videos, and I used them to reinforce many important safety tips. They LOVE the characters you created. Thank you for creating such a kid-friendly site for teaching an important life skill as Internet safety. Everyone had

fun while learning.” Another teacher from Avondale, Ariz. wrote directly to praise Clicky, NetSmartz’s cartoon robot mascot: “Dear Clicky, I want to thank you for being such a great example for my students!!! Keep up the great work and we can’t wait to see what you come up with next.” With the Committee’s support, NCMEC looks forward to continuing our work with state and local educational agencies to target specific safety issues they see in their own communities.

Finally, NCMEC’s Take 25 campaign, created in honor of National Missing Children’s Day, annually recognized on May 25, encourages families to take 25 minutes to talk to their children about safety and abduction prevention and helps communities access the resources they need to raise awareness of missing and exploited children’s issues. Communities can participate by involving their community leaders, educators and trusted adults to pledge to take 25 minutes to talk to children about safety. Since March 17, 2014, the Take 25 Campaign website has received over 56,000 visits and distributed more than 280,000 hard copy resources.

NCMEC believes that every child deserves a safe childhood. In closing, Mr. Chairman, the National Center is grateful for your leadership and continuing support, and that of your colleagues, in our efforts to protect and educate children. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before your Committee and to share information about NCMEC’s programs to prevent and protect children from these devastating crimes.