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**Opening Statement of Rep. Aaron Bean (R-FL), Chairman  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education  
Hearing: “Protecting Missing and Exploited Children”  
February 6, 2024**

(As prepared for delivery)

Thank you, everyone, for gathering here today. I especially want to thank Ms. DeLaune for offering up her time to testify and, moreover, for her service to missing children across the nation. The Committee eagerly stands behind you, as the safety and protection of children is a top priority.

We are here to discuss the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), but first, let me present a vignette of the world in which I grew up, which pre-existed NCMEC.

In the 70s, I remember as a child we would leave the house after breakfast and return just in time for dinner during the summer. Parents were at ease because unsupervised outdoor activity was seen as a safe, integral part of adolescence and we lived in a high-trust society. Though, over time that image of society slowly faded as communities came apart and the world felt less safe.

Then, in response to this general trend and several high-profile child abductions such as the tragedy of Adam Walsh, President Ronald Reagan signed the Missing Children’s Assistance Act (MCAA). The MCAA allowed NCMEC to become the national resource center in 1984 with the goal of protecting children from abduction, exploitation, and abuse, and, in 2023 alone, NCMEC helped authorities with nearly 30,000 cases.

The NCMEC mission encompasses a range of vital activities, from helping to locate missing children to providing support for victims of abduction and sexual exploitation. The organization works tirelessly to prevent these tragedies from occurring in the first place, creating a safer world for our children.

The organization operates the 24/7 CyberTipline that has assisted law enforcement across the country in the investigation of suspected child exploitation. Since it was established in 1998, the CyberTipline has received more than 183 million reports. It has proven instrumental in combating exploitation, offering hope in times of unimaginable despair.

Furthermore, NCMEC actively engages in prevention and education initiatives. Through efforts such as Team HOPE, NCMEC raises awareness about online safety, human trafficking, and the various risks children may face in today's digital age.

In an online era, which brings with it new opportunities and challenges, NCMEC stands at the forefront combating child exploitation on social media. Through partnerships with law enforcement and the private sector, NCMEC has developed innovative solutions to address the evolving landscape of online threats against children.

Just last week, the country watched as big tech CEOs received sharp criticism for rampant child exploitation on their platforms. NCMEC is more important now than ever.

NCMEC's commitment extends beyond the home front, collaborating with international organizations to combat the global issue of child exploitation. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, such collaborations ensure a united effort against international trafficking threats.

By supporting NCMEC, we contribute to the safety and well-being of all children, ensuring they can grow up in an environment where they are protected, nurtured, and allowed to flourish. That's why I have introduced the Missing Children's Assistance Reauthorization Act of 2023, which would update the law and give NCMEC additional tools to achieve its mission.

At the opening ceremony for NCMEC, President Reagan remarked, "All Americans, and especially our youth, should have the right and the opportunity to walk our streets, to play and to grow and to live their lives without being at risk."

To echo Reagan, I want that same safe upbringing for future generations, and NCMEC is an indispensable partner in achieving that goal.