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June 11, 2013

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**HATCH STATEMENT AT FINANCE COMMITTEE HEARING EXAMINING WAYS TO
PREVENT SEX TRAFFICKING & EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN & YOUTH IN AMERICA**

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Ranking Member of the Senate Finance Committee, today issued the following opening statement at a committee hearing examining effective ways to identify, prevent, and intervene in cases involving sex trafficking and the exploitation of children and youth in America:

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing on domestic sex trafficking of children and youth. This disturbing issue is very relevant to child welfare programs under the jurisdiction of the Senate Finance Committee.

Domestic sex trafficking, primarily of young girls, has recently received widespread public attention. However, much remains unclear about the instances, causes, and potential solutions regarding this growing problem.

For example, there is a shortage of reliable statistical data on how many American girls are sexually trafficked. Some estimates put the number of girls at risk for sexual exploitation at nearly 300,000.

If it's true that hundreds of thousands of girls may be at risk, it is particularly troubling that only a few hundred have been identified and recovered.

Some of these at-risk children are officially known to child welfare system as "thrown away" children. These are children whose parents have either kicked them out of the home or abandoned them to the state. When these children are trafficked and come to the attention of child welfare agencies, the agencies often do not perform proper screening because the child is not in the custody of their parents.

This is an appalling situation.

Mr. Chairman, I think we can all agree that no child should ever be thrown away.

Individuals on the front lines in the fight against trafficking report that instances of domestic sex trafficking are on the rise.

They tell us that former drug dealers have moved on to sex trafficking.

They also tell us that technological advances have made this type of trafficking even easier. Smart phones and other devices provide distance and increased levels of anonymity. And, certain websites that post classified ads soliciting sexual partners also help facilitate trafficking.

Reports indicate that girls in foster care are at an increased risk of being trafficked. Indeed, girls in foster care are especially vulnerable to the advances of traffickers. This is because a girl in foster care is more likely to have experienced neglect or abuse, which increases her risk.

Traffickers will initially present themselves to these girls as a boyfriend who slowly provides indoctrination. Once trafficking commences, the girl may run away from her foster or group home. In many states, when a youth in foster care runs away, no one looks for them.

Too often, regardless of whether or not she was connected to child welfare, if a girl is arrested for prostitution she will not be offered services or treatment. The majority of trafficked girls are thought to be between the ages of 12 and 14. Yet, even though the law stipulates that these girls are too young to give consent, they are often treated as perpetrators of a crime rather than victims of one.

Mr. Chairman, it is simply unacceptable that state child welfare systems are failing to serve these girls. I recognize that these may be difficult cases and that the trauma these children have endured often results in significant challenges. But we need to do a much better job in addressing their complex needs.

Congress needs to send clear, unambiguous signals to state child welfare agencies that they cannot abdicate their responsibilities to these girls.

This hearing should put child welfare agencies on notice that they must begin to work with Congress and with stakeholders in the field to properly identify and provide appropriate prevention and intervention services to victims of domestic sex trafficking and exploitation.

There are promising practices at the state level and there are agencies that are on the right track in identifying, preventing, and intervening in these cases. This hearing will highlight some of these practices and, hopefully, provide us with suggestions for improvements at the federal level.

I know that the Chairman shares my view that the child welfare system in the United States is in desperate need of reform.

For one thing, the financing structure of child welfare is misaligned. The majority of federal dollars are directed at the least desirable outcome: removing children from their homes and placing them with strangers.

I believe that the qualitative and systemic flaws in our current foster care system are among the factors that make girls in the foster care system so vulnerable to traffickers.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this critical hearing.

I'd like to thank the witnesses in advance for your work and for your willingness to engage this committee on such a difficult subject. I look forward to your testimonies.

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