



Statement by

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for the

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Strengthening Federal Support to End Youth Homelessness

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Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here on behalf of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC).

NCMEC is a private, nonprofit organization that serves as a national resource center and information clearinghouse to provide a coordinated response to the problem of missing and exploited children. For more than 35 years, NCMEC has partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice and an array of corporate, private, and public partners to provide resources and services to families, law enforcement, victims, child-serving professionals, and communities to assist in preventing child abductions, recovering missing children, and providing services to deter and combat child sexual exploitation.

Like other nonprofit organizations, NCMEC was created in response to an unthinkable tragedy. In 1981, 6-year-old Adam Walsh was shopping with his mother at a Florida shopping mall when he disappeared. His devastated parents, John and Revé Walsh, had nowhere to turn for help. At that time, there was no 24-hour missing child hotline, no AMBER Alert program, no national, coordinated response to search for missing children, no uniform mechanism to enter missing child reports into the FBI's national database, and little support for impacted families like the Walshes. Despite their own best efforts, ten days after Adam was abducted, he was found murdered more than 100 miles away.

John and Revé channeled their grief and the painful experience of losing Adam and joined forces with other child advocates to create NCMEC in 1984. Since that time, NCMEC has expanded to over 340 employees and hundreds of volunteers, and we have forged strong public-private partnerships with other nonprofits, members of the public, federal and local government agencies, corporate entities, and families and private individuals who help support our mission and honor our commitment to help recover and protect missing and exploited children. NCMEC provides services and programs in five major areas: (1) missing children; (2) child sexual exploitation; (3) professional development and best practices; (4) child safety and prevention; and (5) victim and family support.

NCMEC's unique role addressing missing children cases enables us to witness firsthand the impact when children run away and the lasting impact this experience often has on their lives. We know that children who run away are at risk for serious endangerments, tend to run more than once—often dozens of times—and can suffer lingering, often devastating impact as a result of their runaway experiences.

NCMEC knows that one organization acting alone cannot resolve the issue of runaway children. As a result, we devote enormous resources to working with our public and private partners to find ways to help runaway children and their families disengage from the cycle that drives them to run and help them break free from the long-lasting impacts they so often suffer. After we intake a case, NCMEC never forgets about a runaway child no matter how much time has passed, and we continue searching as long as it takes to help bring the runaway child home.

This written testimony provides the Subcommittee with information pertaining to NCMEC's experience over the past thirty-five years working on runaway cases, including NCMEC's unique role in helping to recover children who run from their home or state social services placement; essential trends derived by NCMEC from the volume of reports we receive; and the public-private partnerships NCMEC leverages to better assist the recovery of these children. Finally, we offer recommendations on what more can be done to address and provide services to runaway children.

I. A Child in Crisis: NCMEC's Experience with Runaway Children

Since NCMEC opened its doors in 1984, and began receiving phone calls to our hotline from across the country, it quickly became apparent that the most common reason children go missing is because they leave home under their own power. National incidence studies sponsored by the Department of Justice¹ have consistently provided research-based confirmation of what we see every day—runaways are by far the largest category of children who go missing. Children who run away from their place of residence² are consistently the largest category of missing child reported to NCMEC each year. In 2015, runaway cases reported to NCMEC accounted for 86% of our entire caseload, and since then this trend has increased. Over the past four years, runaway cases have accounted for 91-92% of all missing child reports received by NCMEC.³ Throughout NCMEC's 35-year history, we have provided resources and assistance to help locate more than 250,000 runaway children.

Far too often, when a child leaves home of his or her own volition, the general public does not view them as a missing child at all, let alone a child in need of significant attention. Although these cases do not always capture the public's attention in the way that high-profile abduction cases may dominate a news cycle, at NCMEC, we realize that the vulnerability of a teenage runaway and the life-threatening endangerments they face require an urgent response regardless of whether a child has run from a generally safe environment or are because the child (or someone they live with) suffers from substance abuse issues, has engaged in self-harm or expressed thoughts of suicide, suffers from a medical condition, or has been neglected or sexually victimized.

Children who run away from home tend to be in their mid- to late-teens, with the average runaway reported to NCMEC being 15-years-old. In NCMEC's experience, it is all too common for a child to run multiple times. Between January 1, 2015 and June 30, 2019, 28% of runaways reported to NCMEC had run at least twice, and on average, these children had run 3 to 4 times. In 2018, the rate of repeat runs increased, with just over half of runaways reported to NCMEC running more than once.

It is very common for a child in foster care or otherwise under the guardianship of a social service agency to run away. In 2018, 94% of runaway children reported to NCMEC were missing from care. The unique issues pertaining to children missing from care will be discussed in greater detail in Section II C.

¹ See National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) 1, 2, 3, available at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/research/NISMART1-3.html>. In NISMART-1 (1988), NISMART-2 (1999), and NISMART-3 (2011), runaway/thrownaway child reports were the largest category of missing children. The related, and disheartening, term "thrownaway" describes a child who is told to leave, or prevented from returning home overnight, by an adult household member who does not arrange alternate care for the child. See NISMART-3, at 3.

² Because NCMEC sees large volumes of cases involving children who run from their parental/guardian home as well as children who run from social services placements, we will refer to these children collectively as running from their places of residence.

³ In 2015, NCMEC received 11,817 cases of runaway children, accounting for 86% of our total missing child caseload. In 2016, we received 18,556 runaway child cases (91%); in 2017, we received 24,914 runaway child cases (91%); in 2018, we received 23, 676 runaway child cases (92%); and as of June 30, 2019, we have received 13,000 runaway child cases (91%).

In NCMEC’s experience, while we see many tragic outcomes when a child runs away, the majority of runaway children are located relatively quickly and safely. More than half of the runaway children recovered last year were located within the first 9 days after they went missing.

In an effort to combat public desensitization and misconceptions relating to runaways, NCMEC is mindful of the language it uses in connection with these vulnerable children. Internally, NCMEC refers to every runaway child case we work on as an “Endangered Runaway.”⁴ We avoid referring to children under the age of 12 as runaways, even if they have left of their own volition, because we recognize the limited social and mental development of a child this young. When publicizing and distributing missing child posters, we avoid describing a child as a “runaway” and purposefully never publicly disclose that a child has run from the foster care system, to ensure that there are no pre-conceived ideas or bias about the child as we encourage the public to help us locate that runaway child just as they would work to locate any other missing child.

II. NCMEC’s Operational Protocols in Assisting Runaway Children

A. NCMEC’s Intake Procedures

Although the tools and technology NCMEC uses to help find missing children have modernized significantly since NCMEC opened its doors, we still take a personalized approach to each report we receive relating to a runaway child. Each case is worked on an individual basis to provide coordinated resources, specialized analytical expertise, technical assistance, and support for law enforcement and the family of the missing child or the social services agency.

NCMEC receives reports regarding runaway children in a number of ways, including from:

- (1) a child’s parent or legal guardian;
- (2) a state social service agency;
- (3) law enforcement; and/or
- (4) issuance of an Endangered Missing Child Advisory.⁵

NCMEC encourages parents and legal guardians to call our 24hour, 365 day/year hotline—1-800-THE-LOST—as soon as they have alerted police that their child has run away or left home. Bilingual call center staff are available at all times, and NCMEC has access to nearly 200 languages through a third-party interpretation service. For institutional guardians, such as a state foster care agency, we have a simplified process to enable these agencies to immediately report a

⁴ NCMEC categorizes missing children reports in five case types: (1) **endangered runaways** (children who have run from a parent, legal guardian, or state care facility); (2) **family abduction** (children who have been taken, wrongfully detained, or concealed by a parent or other family member); (3) **lost, injured, or otherwise missing** (children who disappear under unknown circumstances or who are too young to be considered endangered runaways); (4) **nonfamily abduction** (children taken by someone they know but are not related to or taken by someone unknown to them); and (5) **critically missing young adults** (individuals who are 18, 19, or 20 years old and referred by law enforcement to NCMEC).

⁵ An Endangered Missing Advisory (EMA) is similar to an AMBER Alert, however, while an AMBER Alert typically does not include provisions covering runaway cases, an EMA has criteria that can include cases of runaway children. See Guide for Implementing or Enhancing an Endangered Missing Advisory (U.S. DOJ 2011), *available at* <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/232001.pdf>.

missing child to NCMEC through a digital reporting platform that collects critical information quickly and efficiently, without even requiring a phone call to NCMEC.⁶

NCMEC recognizes that children often go missing in the middle of the night or under circumstances that are so urgent or critical that it may be impossible for a parent or legal guardian to contact NCMEC immediately. In those situations, NCMEC receives electronic notification of runaway children when one of the following occurs:

- (1) a law enforcement agency enters a missing person report for a runaway child into the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database;⁷
- (2) an official Endangered Missing Child Advisory is issued in a critical case; or
- (3) a public missing child notification is broadcast by law enforcement or the news media.

When NCMEC receives such a notification, we proactively contact the investigating law enforcement agency to offer our assistance and ensure that the affected family is provided a coordinated, comprehensive response like that originally envisioned by John and Revé Walsh when they founded NCMEC over thirty-five years ago.

Regardless of how NCMEC is notified about a runaway child, NCMEC's call center specialists perform a comprehensive intake procedure with the parent, guardian, social service worker, or law enforcement agent who is calling so they can collect descriptive information about the child and learn about the circumstances of the child's disappearance. This intake process initiates a specialized internal risk assessment that NCMEC undertakes for each child reported as a runaway to assess potential endangerments that a child may face.

As part of NCMEC's intake process, we seek relevant information to help us evaluate whether the child has:

- (1) Special needs, medical, or mental health conditions;
- (2) Expressed self-harm or suicidal tendencies;
- (3) Active social media accounts;
- (4) Communicated with any children or adults online prior to leaving home;
- (5) Past or current substance abuse; or
- (6) Indicators of possible exploitation or child sex trafficking.⁸

NCMEC's intake process and risk assessment help guide NCMEC's initial response on how best to help locate the runaway child. Technology or social media resources can be rapidly implemented depending on the facts of the child's disappearance, and, in urgent, high-risk situations, NCMEC can deploy representatives to where the child went missing to offer unique on-

⁶ NCMEC has developed a dedicated microsite with information, resources, and secure electronic reporting capability for social services agencies to report children missing from care (available at <https://cmfc.missingkids.org/>).

⁷ Specific flags can be entered by the investigating agency to trigger NCMEC notification. *See, e.g.*, Effective Use of the National Crime Information Center Database with Missing-Child Incidents: A Reference Guide for Public-Safety Telecommunications Personnel (NCMEC 2012).

⁸ While no single indicator confirms child sex trafficking is occurring, there are research-based physical and behavioral red flags to help screen for this possibility. Additional information, including NCMEC-produced guides for parents and child welfare agencies can be found on NCMEC's website at www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking.

site resources.⁹ When the intake indicates a critical response is needed, NCMEC's specialized staff are on-call around the clock to respond and apply their particular skills (e.g., photo imaging, media response, research and analysis) to develop further information about the child's circumstances.

After NCMEC's initial intake and risk assessment is complete, a child's case is assigned to an internal case manager who will remain assigned to that child the entire time that they are missing. This is a unique aspect of NCMEC's case management services for runaway cases and ensures that we can maintain a personal connection with that child while they are missing and if they are recovered and run again at a later date. The case manager's first step is to contact the parent, legal guardian, social service worker, or investigating law enforcement agent who reported the runaway child as missing. Particularly for runaway children, NCMEC is often the only consistent source of background information and details about a child and their unique circumstances.

No matter how short or long the duration that a runaway child is missing, NCMEC will continue to apply carefully coordinated support and analytical and technological resources to each case, in addition to the constant personal touch we maintain with the concerned adult who is searching for the child. NCMEC never stops searching for a runaway child until he or she is located, even if a child "ages out," becomes emancipated, or otherwise is dropped from the caseload of involved agencies or fades from the public's attention.

B. Assessing a Runaway Child's Potential Endangerments

As a result of NCMEC's case work with both missing and exploited children, and through our operation of the CyberTipline,¹⁰ NCMEC has become increasingly aware of the increased risks faced by children who run away, especially children who run away from state care, and who are particularly vulnerable to dangers such as sex trafficking. Last year, one in seven runaway children reported to NCMEC were likely sex trafficking victims.

A child's home environment, including abuse, neglect, or abandonment that can lead to a child's involvement with the foster care system, also can have a significant impact on a child's experience when they run away. NCMEC has long recognized that it is vital to assess and identify each child's individual endangerments to hopefully prevent specific harms to which they are vulnerable.

Over the past several years, NCMEC has noted an increase in runaway cases where a parent, guardian, or investigator reports the child was sexually exploited, has a diagnosed mental health condition or other special needs, or has expressed a desire to harm or kill themselves. NCMEC has tracked other common endangerments for runaways as shown below:

⁹ NCMEC's Team Adam program provides rapid, onsite assistance to law enforcement agencies and families during critical cases involving missing children, including runaways. Consultants are deployed to the scene to provide technical assistance and connect families and law enforcement to NCMEC's vast network of resources.

¹⁰ NCMEC's CyberTipline is the nation's core program to help facilitate the reporting of online child sexual abuse content and prevent future victimization.

Reported Endangerment (NCMEC Runaway Cases 1/1/15 – 6/30/19)	Percentage of Children
Notable Alcohol/Drug Use	51%
Relevant Mental Health Diagnosis	39%
Suicidal Expressions	19%
Likely Victim of Child Sex Trafficking	15%
Self-harm Tendencies	15%
Significant Medical Condition	12%
Gang Involvement	11%
Carrying a Weapon	5%
Pregnant	4%
Other Special Needs	3%

Between 2015 and 2019, 72% of the runaways reported to NCMEC had a least one of these endangerments, and most runaways averaged two endangerments. As might be expected, when a child ran away more than once, they suffered these endangerments at a greater rate.

It is commonly believed that a child is pushed to run away by something negative in the home or a negative personal experience. At NCMEC, we see a troubling trend in the number of runaways who leave their residence because they have been manipulated to believe they are running toward a better situation¹¹—usually fueled by online communications with an adult who is enticing them to leave home. This trend is fueled by modern technology, which allows an adult to cast a wide net across public areas of the internet to identify and entice vulnerable children, and then shift to private or encrypted forms of online communications, where they can solidify a connection with the child. In recent years, NCMEC has seen a large increase in runaway cases where a child has been enticed to run to an adult who seeks to sexually, and otherwise, exploit the child.¹² It is also common for children to travel significant distances when they run away, especially in situations where they have been enticed. More than a third (39%) of all runaway children reported to NCMEC were recovered in a different city from where they went missing.

The risks to a runaway are significant in these cases, and the outcomes are often deeply troubling. The following is an example of one runaway case in which NCMEC assisted.

In January 2018, a 16-year-old girl ran away from her home in South Carolina and left a note for her family indicating she was not happy at home and was going

¹¹ A “better situation” in a child’s view may be a place where the child has less parental restrictions or rules; a love interest is available; or the child has more material benefits (e.g., money, ability to travel, extravagant gifts).

¹² NCMEC analyzed more than 5,800 CyberTipline reports relating to online enticement submitted between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2015 to identify specific trends and characteristics of this new crime. The Online Enticement of Children: An In-Depth Analysis of CyberTipline Reports (NCMEC 2017), *available at* <http://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/ncmec-analysis/Online%20Enticement%20Pre-Travel1.pdf>.

“somewhere better.” Law enforcement tracked her movements to a city in the Midwest and later confirmed she had traveled to Georgia on the date she went missing and then bought a plane ticket to travel across the country where she was picked up by a 30-year-old man. The child had a number of unique endangerments due to a history of past victimization and abuse. NCMEC geo-targeted missing child posters to ask the community for tips and leads and staff ran analytical searches to help determine where specifically the child may have traveled with the adult man. Within days, police located, and were able to recover, the child at the man’s residence in another state, and he was arrested for crimes related to sexual assault and luring a minor. According to investigators, the man had communicated with the child through messaging features on social media apps as well as direct text messages for several months before she ran away.

C. Unique Runaways: Children Missing From Care

Children who are in foster care or are guardians of a state social service agency are more likely to run away from home and/or face other negative outcomes later in life, such as incarceration and homelessness, when they run away. NCMEC refers to children who run from any form of foster care or the care of a state social service agency as children missing from care.

For nearly twenty years, NCMEC has worked with a variety of partners to draw attention to this unique category of runaway children and to ensure that these children do not slip through the cracks. In earlier years, we had crucial partnerships with organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America to help craft and provide guidance and best practices when responding to children who have run away from foster care.¹³

More recently, a tremendous sea change in resources for children missing from care occurred when Congress recognized the need for a uniform prompt response to missing and runaway children from state care and enacted the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014. This legislation addressed a wide variety of issues relating to the proper care and resources for children in the welfare system, but NCMEC lobbied specifically for inclusion of a provision requiring state social services agencies to report missing, abducted, or runaway children immediately to law enforcement and then to NCMEC.¹⁴ Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of children missing from care and being painfully aware of the gaps in reporting such runaway children to NCMEC, we welcomed the law’s enactment. The impact of the new law has been significant because, for the first time, it enables NCMEC to provide coordinated and uniform resources to every child who has run away or gone missing, regardless of what sort of residence they were missing from, which state they ran from, or the circumstances under which they went missing.

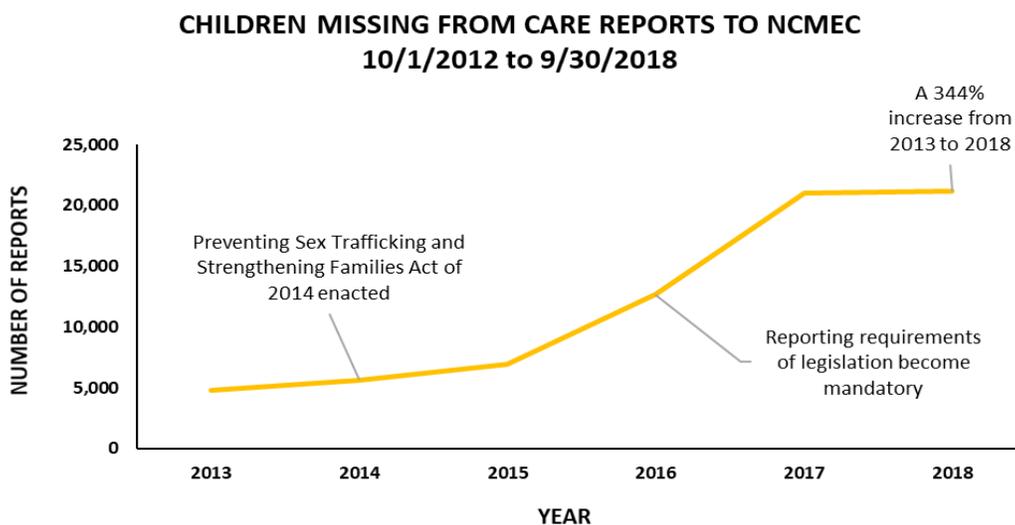
When the legislation was enacted in 2014, it provided states with a two-year implementation period. However, NCMEC immediately realized that coordination with state and county social service agencies would be key to successfully and smoothly implementing this new reporting

¹³ See companion publications CWLA Best Practice Guidelines: Children Missing From Care (CWLA 2005) and Children Missing From Care: The Law-Enforcement Response (NCMEC 2005).

¹⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 671.

paradigm. NCMEC developed new policies, draft agreements, and streamlined enactment of the response to children missing from care.

NCMEC has experienced tremendous growth in its caseload of children missing from care since passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. Since 2012, the number of missing children, most of whom are runaways, reported to NCMEC by state agencies has nearly tripled. This has necessitated dedication of new case management and analytical resources to support these cases and, even more importantly, to provide educational resources and technical assistance to social services as they work to develop new reporting protocols to NCMEC. Today, NCMEC has formal reporting agreements with 9 states and counties¹⁵ and receives electronic reports or hotline calls for missing and runaway foster children from every U.S. state and most territories each year.



Due to the increased vulnerabilities of children who run away from state care, NCMEC continues to devote increased resources to these cases and expands its work on helping to prevent and provide recovery services for these children. For example, NCMEC is identifying possible future partnerships and expanded programs with other organizations that can assist with recovery planning for runaway children, direct services to victimized children, and better, more organized victim and family support.

III. NCMEC’s Unique Tools and Partnerships

A. Technology—A Potential Risk but also a Powerful Tool for Recovery

NCMEC uses technology to play an important role in facilitating the recovery of runaway children. It is a critical tool to develop leads about a missing child’s location, including information about companions who may recently have interacted with the child. Unfortunately, technology also has enhanced the ability of offenders to target young teens and rapidly exploit their vulnerabilities and

¹⁵ NCMEC has formal agreements with Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Los Angeles County, Louisiana, Maine, Texas, and multiple agencies in Wisconsin.

manipulate them with false promises of love and affection to entice them to run away from home. The widespread use of internet-enabled devices among young children and the increasing amount of time they spend online creates both opportunities and risks.

When NCMEC receives a report of a runaway child, we routinely ask whether the child has active social media profiles and in almost half of reports (46%), we are immediately able to gather information about the child's known social media activity. Recognizing that parents and guardians often do not know the full details of their child's online presence, we actively seek this information from a child's friends or siblings. In NCMEC's experience, the same public platforms that help NCMEC locate missing children also may provide an opportunity for adults who wish to harm, exploit, or traffic children, to contact vulnerable potential victims.

B. Public-Private Partnerships to Enhance NCMEC Resources

1. Analytical Resources

NCMEC's mission is amplified when we partner with public and private stakeholders who share our dedication to helping to locate and identify runaway children and help create public awareness to find and reunite missing children with their families. These relationships enable NCMEC to stretch our resources and expand our mission through public-private partnerships that provide vital in-kind, programmatic, and financial support. We use many cutting edge analytical tools in our efforts to quickly locate runaway children. As examples, generous corporate partners such as LexisNexis, Thomson Reuters, Appriss, Neustar, and Palantir contribute resources and expertise that NCMEC uses to review open-source databases and public social media profiles to obtain information that may help identify the possible locations of missing children. These technologies also enable NCMEC to leverage vast data within our past missing and exploited child cases to develop crucial information relating to prior related missing incidents; law enforcement agencies that have had contact with the missing child; individuals the child and their potential companion(s) are known to associate with; and information relating to potential endangerments.

The following is just one example in which NCMEC successfully leveraged its public-private partnerships to help locate a missing child.

In October 2018, a mother reported to NCMEC that her 16-year-old daughter had run away with a friend, also a minor. Her daughter had run away once before, and the mother believed the children left to meet a man they met on social media who claimed he wanted to take modeling pictures of them. The mother was worried that the children were being recruited for sex trafficking and sent NCMEC an image posted on social media showing her child boarding a bus headed for a state that was thousands of miles away. Five days later, law enforcement where the children had traveled responded to a call of gun shots fired at an apartment complex. Two girls and multiple men were at the location, including a man believed to be the one who had enticed the children to travel. He was arrested, but the two girls were frightened and provided fake names to law enforcement and were released. NCMEC provided social media analysis to link a second adult—a woman—to the man who had been arrested. Law enforcement worked with this information to arrange a meeting with the children through social media and ultimately recovered the children and opened a human trafficking investigation against the suspect.

2. Technology and Geo-Targeting

Over the past three decades, NCMEC has seen runaway case trends evolve, and we have evolved our programs and best practices in response. It has become increasingly essential for the public to receive rapid notice when a child goes missing in their geographical area. While NCMEC continues to develop modern solutions to locate runaways more quickly, one of the most effective methods to find a missing child—soliciting the community’s help to circulate photos of missing children—has remained consistent since NCMEC was created in 1984. As a result, NCMEC continues to proactively expand use of unique targeted social media messaging for runaways. Our efforts in this area, bolstered by our partnerships with leading technology companies, have led to many recoveries of runaway children, including the following:

In January 2019, a 12-year-old girl was reported to NCMEC after running away from her home in Georgia. Six days later, at a location over 300 miles away, a woman encountered the child walking in her neighborhood at night. The woman was concerned because the child was confused and claimed to be much older. The woman stayed with the child, but her suspicions led her to look on her Facebook feed, where she quickly found a missing child alert for the child. The woman contacted police who recovered the child.

In a second case, in February 2017, a 15-year-old girl ran away from her home in Colorado. After the child was reported to NCMEC, NCMEC produced a missing child alert video for the child, which was distributed widely on Facebook and geotargeted to areas where the child was believed to be traveling with an adult male. The video received over 300,000 views before one viewer contacted NCMEC’s hotline with information about the child’s possible location, enabling police to recover the child that day.

While families and volunteers continue to post physical flyers in their community when a child runs away, NCMEC’s partnerships with social media companies significantly promote the visibility of runaway child images to geographically targeted digital audiences who are most likely to have information about a particular child. NCMEC helps ensure that critical, time-sensitive information relating to a runaway child is broadcast far and wide.

3. Runaway Train

Twenty-five years ago, NCMEC contributed to a music video project for the song “Runaway Train” produced by the band Soul Asylum, which featured images of actual missing children, and ultimately helped to recover more than twenty missing children. This year, NCMEC is proud to renew this successful campaign with the release of a remixed version of the song. The project¹⁶ features a new music video that dynamically geolocates images of missing children to the specific, local geographic area where the viewer is watching the video.

Just weeks ago, NCMEC celebrated its first success in recovering a runaway child as a result of this new video. In late May 2019, a 15-year old girl from the Midwest who had run away from her residence a month earlier, contacted her guardian and was recovered safely. NCMEC had encouraged media outlets to create and broadcast geographically-specific versions of the

¹⁶ See www.runawaytrain25.com.

“Runaway Train” video. One Midwest news station responded and generated and televised a version of the video that featured the 15-year-old runaway’s image. As the broadcast circulated widely in the targeted area, a friend of the missing child saw the video and convinced her to reach out to her guardian.

4. Poster Delivery Partnerships

Unfortunately, sometimes the search for a runaway child extends into a longer period of time. Six percent of runaways reported to NCMEC remain missing for 6 months or longer. When this happens, NCMEC continues to work actively to maintain public attention and utilizes different technology to assist with efforts in locating the child. Media and retail partnerships, such as Valassis’ “Have You Seen Me?” program; LexisNexis’ ADAM (Automated Delivery of Alerts on Missing Children) Program; OAAA’s digital billboards; and Walmart’s Missing Children’s Network poster distribution, help us to regionally-target information about runaways.¹⁷ NCMEC tries to ensure no runaway is ever forgotten by the public by proactively highlighting cases of longer-term missing children and publicizing anniversary dates of each runaway’s disappearance. We also have staff with special expertise in using forensic technology to: produce digital age-progression images; populate interactive mapping software to search and identify children; and assist in biometrics collection and analysis as need to help identify a child, or tragically, the remains of a child.

NCMEC understands that there are limits to our reach, so we have always partnered with other non-profits and federal and state public agencies that share our mission to help recover runaway children. As a national clearinghouse, it is extremely important for NCMEC to utilize specific skills and complementary services of like-minded organizations to collaboratively help deliver better outcomes for the runaway children and families we serve.

5. Non-Profit Collaborations

NCMEC has had a long-standing relationship with the National Runaway Safeline, a nonprofit whose mission is to keep America’s runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth safe and off the streets. For decades, our respective 24-hour hotlines have coordinated to make prompt referrals to each other to ensure that appropriate services are offered to runaway children and their families. To help identify runaway children who may particularly be at risk for sex trafficking, NCMEC has collaborative partnerships with organizations like THORN, Marinus Analytics, and the Exchange Initiative, which develop unique technology and software to help locate victims more quickly.

NCMEC also has strengthened its partnerships with non-profit organizations across the country that provide direct services to runaway and homeless youth, including family and youth homeless shelters, group homes, substance treatment facilities, and drop-in youth programs. Our collaborations with these groups include information sharing relating to this unique population of missing children and coordination on trying to locate specific runaway children who might be seeking services with one of these providers.

¹⁷ Cumulatively, these media and retail partners, plus hundreds of smaller such partners, have distributed and displayed over 700,000 posters of NCMEC’s missing children, including runaways.

6. Enhanced Child and Family Services

In addition to NCMEC's case management, analytical support, outreach, and prevention education, we also offer support to families whose children have run away. These services are facilitated by NCMEC's master-level mental health and child welfare professionals, who also manage voluntary initiatives to expand resources available to help families, including NCMEC's Family Advocacy Outreach Network (FAON) and Team HOPE. NCMEC's FAON is a referral system of treatment professionals experienced in treating children who have run away. NCMEC works to recruit and support these professionals who work closely with NCMEC to provide ongoing crisis management and therapy, including in-person intervention, to families and recovered victims on a reduced fee or pro-bono basis. NCMEC also supports families through Team HOPE, a facilitated volunteer group of parents and family members who have experienced a missing or sexually exploited child and can provide peer counseling and support to other families.

IV. Goals and Outlook

Much more can be done within our existing resources to partner and expand our collective efforts to help locate runaway children and to ensure that they can find secure, stable placements once they are covered. NCMEC looks forward to increasing its partnerships with other child-serving non-profits and direct service providers that interact with homeless youth. We continue to explore opportunities where we can capitalize on technology advances to better identify child victimization and to more efficiently locate children who have run away from home—and wherever possible, to bring in new technology partners willing to contribute their expertise and ideas to our mission.

NCMEC is grateful for the chance to share our perspective and discuss with the Subcommittee our programs to help find and assist runaway children. We look forward to continuing to work with the Subcommittee, the Committee on Education and Labor, and other Members of Congress to support the children and families impacted by this issue and to help reduce the incidence of runaway children, hasten their safe and quick return, and prevent all forms of child victimization.