Chairwoman Haley Stevens (D-MI)
of the Subcommittee on Research and Technology

Joint Research & Technology and Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
The Role of Technology in Countering Trafficking in Persons

Tuesday, July 28, 2020

Good morning and welcome to this hearing to examine the role of science and technology in combatting human trafficking. I look forward to hearing testimony from our distinguished panel of witnesses on this critical issue, especially as we prepare to reflect on World Day Against Trafficking in Persons later this week.

The perpetrators of this crime exploit the most vulnerable for profit. They often charm or befriend victims, mostly the young and those in desperate circumstances, by offering a place to live, money or attention. Then they use force, fraud, and coercion to strip them of their freedom. In my home state of Michigan, we have the 11th highest call volume to the National Human Trafficking Hotline. In my own district, the Oakland County Human Trafficking Task Force serves as a resource for victims and their advocates and parents, professionals, and others.

National and international anti-trafficking efforts have helped rescue many survivors of sexual exploitation and forced labor. Unfortunately, trafficking statistics are increasing despite these efforts for the past 20 years. And COVID-19 has only re-directed these illicit activities toward more cyber-enabled exploitation, especially the sexual exploitation of minors. This is a $150 billion enterprise in part because it is low risk and high reward for the perpetrators. We simply lack the tools to disrupt human trafficking at scale.

However, increased and focused investments in science, technology, and collaboration may enable us to achieve significant progress in our anti-trafficking efforts. We do not have standardized and interoperable data sets to understand and measure the prevalence of human trafficking and not having identifiable metrics for measuring effectiveness of interventions. But increased collaboration among organizations collecting various types of data and tools such as machine learning can help us overcome these challenges. I am calling on the National Science Foundation, the Department of Transportation, the National Institute of Standards and Technology and other federal research agencies to utilize their resources to develop tracking, standards, detect patterns, and develop data analytics to combat the existence of human trafficking at a national and a global level.

We have a lot of work to do and I look forward to today's discussion.

Thank you and I yield back.