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October 25, 2019

Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism
Hearing Entitled
"Combatting Human Trafficking"

Good morning Chairman Max Rose and distinguished committee members. It is both an honor and a privilege to testify before you today on this incredibly important issue on behalf of Sheriff Greg Seabolt and the many dedicated professionals at the Randolph County Sheriff's Office. I am Colonel Aundrea Azelton, Chief Deputy at the Randolph County Sheriff's Office. I am a 24 year law enforcement veteran with ten years of investigative experience. In 2016, I left Randolph County Sheriff's Office and went to work as a special victim's unit detective in Alamance County. I was assigned by Sheriff Terry Johnson to work human trafficking cases there. At that time, I had absolutely no experience or training and very little knowledge about human trafficking. However, I was quickly connected to the Alamance Anti-Human Trafficking Advocacy Council comprised of detectives from local municipalities, assistant district attorneys, an SBI agent and a representative from Alamance for Freedom, a NGO focused on advocacy for human trafficking victims. Through that council, I received knowledge and training that helped me recognize and understand my role in the process necessary to investigate human trafficking and the resources available to trafficking victims. I am, by no means an expert in human trafficking investigations, however I can testify to the fact that these investigations are complex and there are many forms of human trafficking that I had never before realized were in our communities. I can also testify that these investigations are beyond the existing expertise or experience of most local agencies in North Carolina without the assistance of the State Bureau of Investigations and/or

Homeland Security Investigations and impossible without collaboration from the District Attorney's Office and a local NGO. I left Alamance County and returned to the Randolph County Sheriff's Office as the Chief Deputy in 2018. I will testify that our agency currently lacks the manpower, training and resources necessary to investigate human trafficking. We do recognize that while human trafficking may not be wide spread in Randolph County, the potential is there and even one trafficking victim in our community is worth the effort to prepare our agency for these investigations.

Human Trafficking takes many forms and does not discriminate; every case is different from the next. Our most vulnerable citizens are being victimized in our communities in plain sight. These victims commonly come from backgrounds of poverty, domestic abuse, substance abuse, family dysfunction or simple misfortune that have placed them in a position of vulnerability. They are targeted by predators that promise something better, often basic needs like simply a place to live. Traffickers use many different techniques to lure, coerce or force their victims into sexual servitude, the sex trade or labor. They are very adept at convincing victims to perform whatever act they have chosen as long as it benefits them. Traffickers are even more skilled at holding these victims mentally hostage through emotional manipulation. Those powerful manipulations require even more powerful resources to help victims overcome their fears and or attachments to their traffickers.

NGO's are therefore a key to fighting human trafficking. These organizations must have resources and Law enforcement must partner with these organizations in order to be able to offer human trafficking victims something better than the life they are living. These organizations must be on the front end of investigations. Law enforcement cannot wait until they have a human trafficking investigation underway; it is imperative that they already have a partnership with these organizations and understand the services and resources available to victims if they hope to convince victims to come forward, cooperate with investigations and testify against their handlers.

Community Awareness is equally important. These victims are often living in plain sight among us, not just handcuffed in the basement. Unfortunately for our community, it is necessary that everyone understand that human trafficking is not simply physical captivity but can be, and is more likely to be a more subtle mental captivity of power, control and dependence. Our schools, businesses, churches and other governmental offices must become partners with law enforcement so they

can recognize the indicators of human trafficking and know how to report the suspicion and to whom should it be reported.

It is equally important that we change the mindset of law enforcement in regards to trafficking victims. When the term human trafficking is mentioned, most people will picture a child or young woman, chained or physically restrained and locked away in a basement. In actuality, many cases are much more complex and not nearly as clear cut. Many times victims appear to be complicit in the crimes that officers or detectives are investigating. Victims of Human trafficking are many times participating in crimes of drug trafficking, prostitution and frauds. Those victims, who are being coerced or deceived into participating, are usually unlikely to cooperate with detectives and are even less likely to self-identify as a victim. They either fear their trafficker, trust their trafficker or rely on them for their most basic needs or to provide for their addiction. In some cases the trafficker is a romantic partner or even a parent. These cases often end with the victim being charged for the crime and never even recognized as a victim. In cases where victims are identified, the likelihood of the victim being cooperative in testifying against their trafficker is slim.

Human trafficking cases are complex. These cases involve what we classify in law enforcement as special victim investigations, however they require the resources and longevity of a Vice Narcotics style investigation involving a tremendous amount of manpower and sometimes months of investigation. These cases generally involve technology that requires yet another skill set to properly investigate. In addition, human trafficking does not operate solely within a jurisdiction; victims are moved or operated from county to county, across state lines and into other countries. Most counties and municipalities in North Carolina simply do not have the manpower and resources to properly and completely investigate these cases. Agencies are often overwhelmed with obvious crimes and focused on the current opioid epidemic. It is therefore imperative that human trafficking be investigated from a task force perspective and include partners from local, state and federal agencies; but also include prosecutors, NGO's and other service agencies like the Department of Social Services. Local agencies cannot investigate these cases alone. The first step an agency must take is recognizing that although human trafficking may not be a wide spread problem in their jurisdiction, even one trafficking victim is too many. We must make training and education a priority and initiate those necessary partnerships so we know and understand the complexities of investigations, can recognize the indicators of human trafficking and can be prepared to properly, skillfully and effectively interact with victims and have services and resources in place to offer them.

It takes a team to bring these cases to fruition. If agencies hope to combat human trafficking in their jurisdictions they must have the support of law makers and the resources of our state and federal government. The Randolph County Sheriff's Office is therefore seeking a Task Force position with the Department of Homeland Security in an effort to initiate a partnership to combat human trafficking in our community. On behalf of my agency and potential victims in our county, I thank you all for your willingness to listen, to develop laws that protect victims and allocate funding to assist agencies like ours in this important crime fighting endeavor.