

**Opening Statement of Senator Heidi Heitkamp  
Combating Human Trafficking: Federal, State, and Local Perspectives  
September 23, 2013**

Thank you Chairman Carper. I would also like to thank Ranking Member Coburn, Sen. Chiesa and the other members of this Committee as we look to focus attention on a major human rights issue that can be challenging to identify and too easily overlooked in this country.

First, I would like to recognize our distinguished panelists who have joined us here this afternoon. We have before us accomplished members of the federal government who have made human trafficking a priority. Our second panel is comprised of an impressive group of individuals who are on the frontlines of addressing this issue. Thank you all for coming today, your presence here and your testimony before this Committee are a crucial step in creating greater awareness here in Washington, and across the country, of the scourge of human trafficking.

As the former Attorney General of North Dakota, human trafficking has always been an issue that I have been keenly aware of but have had difficulty getting my head around. There is seemingly little reporting or data available on the issue as it pertains to domestic human trafficking. It was because of this perceived lack of attention and information that Senator Chiesa and I approached Chairman Carper recently about the need to bring attention to the issue of human trafficking. I expressed to the Chairman that I had heard an increase in anecdotal concerns being presented to me about potential incidents of human trafficking, an alarming trend that I felt needed to be brought to the forefront of discussions at every level of federal, state, local, and tribal government.

All too often, human trafficking is confused with human smuggling. I believe that, given the nature of human smuggling and the varied and complicated issues related to undocumented immigration, trafficking is frequently lumped in as just another problem created by illegal immigration. Human smuggling involves foreign nationals, who do not have proper documentation, seeking out and paying for the services of a smuggler to bring them across the border and into our country. While there are certainly abuses that occur in the context of human smuggling, it is important to remember that the vast majority of those being smuggled are willing participants in the act.

Human trafficking is not human smuggling. Trafficking victims rarely, if ever, have a choice in the matter at any time during their ordeal. Trafficking involves an active predator that seeks to prey upon the most vulnerable members of our society. They prey upon our homeless, our abused, our young women and children, our Native women and children, our immigrant communities ... they prey upon those on the margins of our society who we all are at fault for overlooking and ignoring. It is imperative upon all of us to not just look at human trafficking, but to stop turning a blind eye to those on the margins and addressing the root causes that lead many of these victims to be so vulnerable in the first place.

Human traffickers possess no moral compass or value for human life itself ... those who traffic in human beings simply attach a dollar value to each individual the same way they would any other commodity. . The human and social costs to this country of these deplorable acts are real. Even when we are able to rehabilitate and provide appropriate services to the victims, they have lived a life devoid of societal connections, are lacking in many basic skills necessary for entering the legitimate workforce, and must bear the mental and physical scars of modern-day slavery.

It is time for all levels of our society to realize that this is not a problem that occurs in “other” countries ... that this is something that they only read about or see in movies or on television. Human trafficking is occurring in communities all across the United States, and it is not just sex trafficking. Labor trafficking, especially of newly arrived immigrants, documented and undocumented, is an enormous problem. Whether in factories, on farms, or in your local diner, human trafficking of workers is right under our noses. No longer can we turn a blind eye to this issue, and I look forward to today’s testimony and discussion as a launching point for further action on this issue.