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Before the
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families

Hearing on
Falling Through the Cracks: The Challenges of Prevention and Identification in Child
Trafficking and Private Re-homing

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Good morning. My name is Megan Twohey and I’m a journalist at Reuters, based in New York City.

Thank you Chairwoman Hagan, Ranking Member Enzi and other members of the subcommittee for inviting me to testify today.

Starting in 2012, I began examining what are called disrupted adoptions—cases in which parents conclude they cannot successfully raise an adopted child. During my research, I discovered a clandestine online world where some of these parents solicited new families for children they no longer wanted.

In Internet forums on Yahoo and Facebook, the posts from these parents were striking: “I am totally ashamed to say it but we do truly hate this boy!” one woman wrote of the 11-year-old son she had adopted from Guatemala. “I would have given her away to a serial killer, I was so desperate,” said another parent of her adopted daughter.

These parents weren’t simply venting. They were actively offloading children. It’s called “private re-homing,” a term first used by people seeking new homes for their pets.

What we didn’t know – what no one knew – was how often this was happening, and what had become of the children who were given away.

Because parents handled the custody transfers privately, often with strangers they met online, and often through nothing more than a notarized power of attorney, no government agency was involved and none was investigating the practice. The federal government estimates that, overall, “about 10 to 25 percent” of adoptions fail, but no authority systemically tracks what happens to children after they are adopted domestically or internationally.

For 18 months, Reuters sought to document the illicit custody transfers in the black market for adopted children.

To quantify the frequency of re-homing, we conducted a deep dive into one of the online forums where this activity was taking place. We meticulously examined more than 5,000 messages

posted on the Yahoo bulletin board going back five years and we built a database to help us process our findings.

We discovered that over this five-year period, in this one forum alone, a child was offered to strangers on average once a week. The activity spanned the nation: Children in 34 states had been advertised. Many were transferred from parents in one state to families in another. At least 70 percent had been adopted from overseas, and many were said to suffer from physical, emotional or behavioral problems.

It was clear from the online descriptions of these children that they were among society's most vulnerable. Child abuse experts pointed out that their backgrounds-- and the manner in which they were advertised--made them ripe for exploitation.

Beyond the database, we pieced together more than a dozen cases of re-homing. I travelled around the country, gathering records and interviewing parents and adoptees.

These are three examples of what I found:

After determining that the 10-year-old boy she adopted out of the foster care system was too troubled to keep, a Wisconsin mother solicited a new family for him on a Yahoo group. "I couldn't stand to look at him anymore," she told me. "I wanted this child gone." Within hours of posting the advertisement, the mother handed the boy off in a hotel parking lot to a woman whose biological children had been permanently removed from her care and to a man who is now in prison for child pornography. This couple, living in Illinois at the time, drove the boy home with them, with the Wisconsin mother having no idea who they really were. She had no idea the Illinois woman's children had been removed after officials determined she suffered "severe psychiatric problems" as well as "violent tendencies." Or that the man had an affinity for young boys that he would later share with an undercover agent in a pedophile chat room. This woman believed their assurances that they were good people with good intentions. Months later, a former counselor to the boy insisted the Wisconsin mother take him back. When he returned, the boy told her he had spent much of his time away with the Illinois man now in prison for child pornography.

In another case, a Russian girl named Inga thought her adoption by an American couple would bring a world of happiness. "My picture was, I'm gonna have family, I'm gonna go to school, I'm gonna have friends," Inga, now 27, told me. Less than a year after bringing Inga home, her adoptive parents gave up trying to raise her. They say the adoption agency never told them that Inga struggled to read or write, that she suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, that she smoked. The parents say they tried therapy and support groups. They even reached out to a Russian judge to undo the adoption. When nothing worked, they turned to the Internet, and sent Inga to three different families over the course of six months. None wanted to keep her. In one home, Inga says she had sex with a sibling and suffered physical abuse. In another, she says the father molested her. Inga was sent to a Michigan psychiatric facility at the age of 13 after her adoptive parents refused to take her back. Officials characterized Inga's troubles this way: "substance abuse, domestic violence, separation from parents, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, attachment issue and mental health issues." To

Inga, the situation seemed bleak: "My parents didn't want me. Russia didn't want me. I didn't want to live."

Another girl, Nita Dittenber, was adopted from Haiti at 13. She told me she also suffered suicidal thoughts, as she was passed among four families within two years. Her adoptive mother in Idaho solicited new parents for her on a Yahoo group, citing behavioral problems and a bad attitude. The first family to take Nita lived in Ohio. She says she was one of 33 children and that the environment was chaotic. The second family lived in Twin Falls, but that too was a bad fit. The third family abruptly sent her away after Nita helped bring to light allegations of sexual abuse against other children in the home. Now 18, Nita says the feelings of abandonment took a toll. In addition to suicidal thoughts, she developed an eating disorder.

Many of the young people I interviewed told me they had felt voiceless and alone. Few had found anyone to advocate on their behalf.

Why does re-homing happen?

Parents who offered their children on the Internet told us they had few options as they tried to raise children with many behavioral problems. Adoption agencies refused to help. Residential treatment centers were expensive. And some parents feared they would be charged with abuse or neglect if they tried to relinquish their child to the state.

And who are the people who take the children in?

To be sure, many of them are competent and compassionate caretakers. But as our investigation showed, re-homing also has allowed abusers and others who escape scrutiny to easily obtain children.

What are the obligations of the web sites on which these re-homing forums have flourished?

Depends who you ask. After I informed Yahoo of the activity I saw on Yahoo user groups, the company swiftly took the sites down. Facebook, by contrast, allowed a similar forum to continue operating after we exposed it. In explaining why, a company spokesperson told me that "the Internet is a reflection of society, and people are using it for all kinds of communications and to tackle all sorts of problems, including complicated issues such as this one."

Is re-homing legal? The answer is complicated.

No state or federal laws specifically prohibit re-homing. Some states restrict the advertising and custody transfers of children, but those laws are confusing, frequently ignored and rarely prescribe criminal sanctions.

An agreement among the 50 U.S. states called the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children, or ICPC, is meant to ensure that child welfare authorities oversee custody transfers, review prospective parents and account for what happens to children sent from one state to another. Many law-enforcement officials told me they had never heard of the compact.

Since our investigation, at least four states—Wisconsin, Louisiana, Colorado and Florida-- have enacted new restrictions on child advertising, custody transfers or both.

The sponsor of the Wisconsin bill called re-homing “a gaping loophole” that allows children to be “placed in unsafe situations with dangerous and sometimes life-threatening outcomes.” A Florida state senator called re-homing “a sick thing.”

In terms of a federal response, the Congressional Research Service issued a report recommending ways Congress could restrict re-homing. And as you know, the Government Accountability Office will begin studying state and federal policies related to re-homing this summer.

At the request of U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, four federal departments have been meeting to identify ways to address re-homing. Senator Wyden expressed shock that advertising children online “does not seem to violate any federal laws.”

Some child advocates say a federal law should place uniform restrictions on the advertising of children and require that all custody transfers of children to non-relatives be approved by a court. They say differing state responses aren’t adequate to address what is largely an interstate practice.

Other advocates are seeking more government support for struggling adoptive families and more scrutiny of prospective adoptive parents.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this issue. Unfortunately, I can only give voice to some of the young people affected by this practice. There remain many unaccounted re-homed children whose whereabouts are unknown.