

**Testimony of Detective Thea M. Pirnat
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Chairman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the Committee.

My name is Thea Pirnat. I am a detective currently assigned to the Child Exploitation Unit of the Fairfax County Police Department. My unit investigates parental abductions, missing and runaway juveniles, child pornography, sex offender registry violations, underage prostitution, juvenile human trafficking, and the use of communication devices to solicit minors as part of the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force. Prior to working in the Child Exploitation Unit, I was assigned to the Child Abuse Squad where my investigations involved the physical and sexual abuse of children.

If there is anything that I can share with you from my experience in law enforcement and in investigations, it is that there are real monsters out there that walk among us and prey upon our children. They are difficult to spot. It would be nice to believe that the only monsters out there that would harm our children are creepy guys wearing masks and hiding in bushes. Those monsters are indeed out there, but more likely than not the monsters preying upon our children are not hiding in the bushes, but are hiding in plain sight. The monster may be your daughter's new boyfriend, your son's little league coach, your niece's daycare teacher, or your nephew's new online chat friend. More disturbing, the monster may be someone who shares the same DNA and last name as your child; a trusted family member – even a parent.

In the cases involving runaway juveniles, the assumption is that these children left voluntarily and will return voluntarily. The majority of them do return on their own when they are ready; however, that does not mean that they return home unharmed. Some are fortunate and are taken in by trusted friends or other family members, but others end up sleeping on the streets, or, as in one particular case that I had, in the woods as part of a homeless camp. Others are taken in by those they think they can trust, but cannot. They are introduced to criminal activities like gangs, drugs and prostitution. They are used for sex and sometimes return pregnant or report sexual assaults upon their return. Sadly, sometimes they never come home. In some of these instances, we have confirmation that they have become victims of a homicide. This was the case for a fourteen year old female reported missing to us in October 2008. She was found in Maryland in November 2008, after being handcuffed, strangled and stabbed by the thirty-three year old male that she had been staying with. In other instances, we never know what becomes of these juveniles because they are never seen from or heard from again.

Whenever a child is reported missing, there is an urgent need to act as quickly as possible. This is never in doubt with so called “stranger” abductions, but in the cases of parental abductions, there is a myth that the child will be safe because he is with a parent, not a stranger. On any given day, you can check the national headlines to find out that this is not true.

In the fall of 2008, I went to Florida to assist in the extradition back to Virginia of a woman who had abducted her children nearly fifteen years earlier. I was asked to assist on the extradition in order to interview the previously abducted children, now adults aged twenty and nineteen, on allegations of sexual abuse made against their father.

Prior to absconding with her daughters, ages five and six at the time, in violation of existing court orders, the mother had made a series of allegations of sexual abuse against the father involving the daughters which were all considered unfounded at that time. Child Protective Services had suspected the mother of coaching the children when they found her in possession of an anatomically correct doll. The mother also took with her a ten year old son she had from a previous relationship. There was no known custody order between the mother and the son’s biological father and no complainant ever came forward about her leaving with him. The mother was assisted in this abduction by family members who believed the allegations of sexual abuse. She left the country with her children for a number of years before returning to the United States and residing in Florida where she was finally located. I interviewed the two daughters and I also interviewed their older half-brother who was twenty-five at the time of my interview with him. He did not know much about his own biological father other than what his mother had told him which was that he did not want anything to do with his son. He had memories of his step-father which were mostly positive except that he believed his step-father had been sexually abusing his half-sisters. This belief was based on information that his mother told him when he was ten years old.

Despite the fifteen year lapse and suspected coaching by the mother, I conducted a very standard sexual abuse investigation. I took their statements about the sexual abuse. One of the daughters agreed to participate in a controlled phone call to her father and confront him about the alleged abuse while I listened. This was a very difficult step in the investigation for all parties involved. We had not yet notified the father that his children had been located because we wanted to conduct a thorough investigation into the sexual abuse. The first time this father heard from his daughter in fifteen years, she accused him of sexually abusing her. Both the father and daughter cried on the phone as he begged her to believe him that the sexual abuse never happened, that her mother had lied to her, that he just wanted to know where she was, and that he still loved her. The phone call ended with the daughter hanging up on her father.

Upon returning to Virginia, we notified the father that his daughters had been located and that we had an active sexual abuse investigation that we needed to conclude. The father cooperated in our investigation by coming in for an interview and also taking a polygraph examination. He passed the polygraph examination, but the results did not surprise me. I

did not believe the disclosures of sexual abuse to be consistent with valid allegations based on my experience and training.

I had no doubt that these three young individuals believed the sexual abuse to be true and were not intentionally lying to me. However, I believed these memories to have been created falsely for them by their mother. All three young individuals were disappointed and angry when I advised them that there would be no criminal charges brought against their father. They were adamant that their father got away with something.

All three of the children stood by their mother when it was time for her to face the criminal charges of abduction. They believed that she was protecting her daughters and did not deserve any negative consequences for her actions. Even the father agreed to leniency in this case, resulting in a plea deal where the woman was sentenced to two years in prison with the entire two year sentence to be suspended. This, in my opinion, is the judicial equivalent of a “slap on the wrist.” The father agreed to this in the hopes that he would be able to restore his relationship with his children by showing their mother mercy. When I spoke to them all last, there was no family reunion. No happy ending. I doubt they will ever have the relationship that the father craves and probably deserves. They still believed the father to be the villain in their life story.

Their mother took them away from their father and other family members. She took them away from their friends, school and other support networks. Their mother had them use new names and lie about their identities. The daughters believed themselves to be victims of sexual abuse, but were unable to discuss it with others or get counseling services. The daughters told me that they never even discussed it with each other because they did not get along or were no longer on speaking terms. One of the daughters admitted to me that she had become a drug addict by the time she was sixteen; using marijuana, alcohol, mushrooms and pills. She did not stop her drug use until she was pregnant at the age of seventeen. This mother robbed her own children of what may have been a perfectly healthy childhood and delayed them starting off their lives as normal adults. I believed the abducting mother to be the villain in this story, leaving in her wake four destroyed lives: the life of a father, the life of the two daughters and the life of one son.

As awful as this situation was for this father and his two daughters, I felt the most sadness for the son. When I sat in the interview room down in Florida, I sat across from a very masculine young man who openly sobbed as he talked of things that had transpired over the last fifteen years. He was saddened by his mother’s arrest, but there was also a slight sense of relief that the truth had come out and his current situation was over. This devoted son and loyal brother had maintained his secret identity years into his adulthood believing that he was protecting his mother and sisters. He had worked as a plumber’s apprentice, but was unable to get his own work license or secure college credits in his real name because his mother had maintained the paperwork with his true identity at a location that was not disclosed to him. He expressed his regrets about not being able to participate in organized sports or secure a driver’s license. He hoped that his mother

would release this paperwork to him now, so that he could move forward with his life under his real name.

Only when I talked to this young man about his biological father whom he had never met and believed did not want anything to do with him, did I recognize a moment of fleeting doubt in the stories his mother had been telling him. I was concerned that even though this young man had never been reported as abducted as far as we knew, that he may very well have been taken away from his biological father also. I promised this young man while in Florida that I would try to locate his father and allow him to hear from his father himself about why he had not been part of his son's life.

When I returned to Virginia, I was successful in tracking down his biological father only to learn he was already deceased. I did not want to call this young man with only bad news so I continued my search and was able to locate a paternal first cousin to this young man living in Virginia. I called his cousin and explained to her who I was and why I was calling. She was overcome with joy and could not wait to speak with him. She talked of cousins that wondered what had happened to him and cousins that never met him. I asked for my own personal curiosity why this young man's relationship had been severed from his biological father and his biological father's family. The cousin explained that the biological father had been repeatedly threatened by the son's mother and her relatives and ultimately backed out of his son's life out of the fear of bodily harm.

It is no secret that time is the enemy in cases involving missing and abducted children. The longer a child is unaccounted for, the more likely that they are being harmed. Sometimes they are victims of physical abuse or neglect. Sometimes they are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. Or, like in the case example I provided, they are victims of various forms of emotional abuse. There is nothing that I know of that can undo or make right the kind of harm that is being done. No prison sentence truly equates to justice. The most important thing we can do is to recover these children as quickly as possible.

I can tell you that local law enforcement is doing everything possible to locate missing and abducted children as quickly as we can. We get personally and emotionally involved while maintaining our professionalism. We utilize any and all resources made available to us. We partner with other local law enforcement agencies, federal law enforcement agencies and resources such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We learn constantly evolving technologies and how to apply them in our investigations. We rely on tried and true investigative techniques like interviews and area canvasses. We embrace the use of the media and Amber Alerts when appropriate in our cases.

I submit to you that there is no tool that local law enforcement is not willing to learn and use if given lawful access. No one should be able to hide behind "right to privacy" claims when it means locating our abducted and missing children. If children are reported missing and entered into NCIC as missing or abducted, why should local law enforcement be denied notice when these missing children's names or social security numbers are being used? I see no logical reason that local law enforcement would be

denied information when the names and social security numbers of those wanted for child abduction are being used either. We search public databases and write court orders to get information from private companies sometimes resulting in dangerous delays in our investigations. If there are Federal agencies that have information that could possibly lead to the successful recovery of missing and abducted children, this information needs to be shared without consequence. It is, after all, for the greater good of protecting our children.

I would also like to explain another obstacle in parental abduction investigations and suggest a possible solution. There is usually a need to verify custody paperwork if it exists. This is not possible to do immediately when the complaint is coming in on the weekend, in the evening, or over a holiday as they usually do. This often results in a delay of deploying the proper resources to start an investigation, make an apprehension of an abductor and recover the abducted children. One parent is claiming that the other parent is not returning their children and the other parent is claiming that they do not have to. Officers may act in good faith by enforcing the custody orders they are shown by the complaining party. However, I have seen where the defendant then shows up in criminal court with a contradictory custody order issued in a different jurisdiction.

This type of situation often results in the criminal charges being dismissed until civil courts can resolve the jurisdictional issues. Officers are left confused and disgruntled about how to handle these situations in the future. Many officers end up feeling like child custody disputes, and unfortunately parental abductions, are better off being handled simply as a civil matter with no law enforcement intervention or action. Officers then will sometimes wait until courts are open during regular business hours to secure and see certified copies of custody orders. This delay may only be a day or two, but it provides the abducting parent a huge head start to their intended destination which unfortunately may be outside the country.

I believe a nationwide secure child custody database which law enforcement and the courts can access twenty-four hours a day would help eliminate some of these issues. Law enforcement personnel and court personnel would be able to search for existing child custody orders by the child's name and date of birth; furthermore, courts would be able to find out the existence of child custody orders in other jurisdictions prior to setting new hearing dates and issuing competing orders. Law enforcement personnel would be able to confirm the existence of a child custody order and the basic parameters for enforcement purposes. It should include the basics on who are the custodial parties and their visitation schedules. This would result in law enforcement being able to more confidently and rapidly confirm that a violation of law exists and take immediate enforcement action ultimately resulting in quicker and more successful rates of recovery of abducted children.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for taking testimony on this important issue and for your continued leadership and assistance to law enforcement nationwide.