

**Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Hearing on “Latest Developments in Combating Online Sex Trafficking”**

November 30, 2017

While most of us spent this past holiday weekend with family and friends, victims of human trafficking and their families were forced to live a waking nightmare. Every day traffickers are forcing their victims—many of whom are children—to commit unspeakable acts. And while this practice seems like something from the ancient past, the situation is actually getting worse.

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, human trafficking cases increased by more than a third between 2015 and 2016. More than 2,300 of these cases last year involved trafficking children.

Even though this is a global issue, those statistics are not from far-flung corners of the world. Criminal sex trafficking is getting worse here in the

U.S. In New Jersey alone, we had 83 cases reported so far this year. And the actual number of cases is probably much higher than what gets reported as traffickers move their activity to hidden corners of the web.

The internet undeniably has made the problem of sex trafficking worse. The same efficiency that can make the internet a powerful force for good in many ways can turn brutal when it is used in the sex trade. Some victims report traffickers forcing them to commit unspeakable acts 20 times a day. This simply should not be happening in this day and age. I salute my colleagues in both the House and Senate for proposing changes to existing laws to do more. Because more must be done.

A number of bills have been introduced in both chambers to combat online sex trafficking. Most proposals would modify Section 230 of the Communications Act—also called the Communications Decency Act. That’s the section of the law that exempts websites from civil liability for third-party content posted on their site. Unfortunately, certain rouge websites use that

section of the law to escape paying for the damage caused by their contributions to human trafficking.

I look forward to hearing today about which approaches work best to combat this terrible problem. And I welcome input on whether there are any ways to improve these proposals.

I know that some people worry that these bills may have unintended consequences. They correctly point out that the Communications Decency Act has allowed the internet to thrive. It has allowed web companies to aggressively police their sites for harmful content without fear of legal repercussions.

That's why the critics of altering the law worry that if we are not careful, we could undermine small businesses and unnecessarily harm startups that have nothing to do with human trafficking. Worse, they allege that if Congress does not act in the right way, we could unintentionally undermine the internet as we know it.

I understand these concerns, and I take them seriously. But we cannot ignore the fact that people around the world are being harmed everyday by this trafficking. The consequences are too severe.

That's why I welcome the help from the tech companies that have engaged productively in solving this issue and helping the victims. We all can and should do more. It's simply not acceptable to try to stop work on all legislation in the name of avoiding liability. We owe it to the victims. But more than that, we owe it to the people—adults and children—who will be victimized in the future if we do not act now.

Thank you, I yield back.