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Minority Day of Hearings on “HHS and the Catholic Church: Examining the Politicization of Grants”

December 14, 2011

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for agreeing to hold today’s minority day of hearings so quickly after our full Committee hearing on December 1. I would also like to extend my thanks to your staff for their cooperation in scheduling this hearing and working with us to accommodate today’s witnesses. I am very grateful for all of these efforts.

The reason I feel so strongly about today’s hearing is because I want to make sure our Committee gives a voice to the victims of human trafficking, forced prostitution, and sexual slavery.

At our last hearing, we invited only witnesses from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) who discussed the formal procedures for grant applications. We were missing witnesses who could testify in more detail about who these victims are, what they go through, and why reproductive health services are so critical for their recovery.

Unfortunately, at the last hearing, several members on the Republican side accused HHS of having an anti-Catholic bias. They argued that HHS should have awarded a grant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops even though the Bishops refused to allow any grant funds to be used for family planning services such as abortion and contraceptives.

At the last hearing, George Sheldon, the principal HHS witness, testified that he made his decision based on what “was in the best interest of these victims.” He explained that referrals for reproductive health services are critical for these victims. He stated:

I have talked to ... victims, as well as experts in this field, who have indicated that referral for the full range of gynecological services is an appropriate requirement for these individuals who have been victimized, forced into prostitution.

He also said this:

Ultimately, it is that victim that we are trying to empower, it is the victim that will decide what services they will avail themselves of or what services they will deny.

If our goal is to analyze this grant program in a responsible manner, we cannot ignore the voices of these human trafficking victims, many of whom are very young women who have been exploited and raped by their persecutors.

For these reasons, I am very thankful that Ms. Florrie Burke and Ms. Andrea Powell are here today to share their experiences in helping these victims escape their exploitive conditions and put their lives back together. They will explain why these victims need a full-range of referral services that includes reproductive health services, and they will explain why limits placed on those referrals fail to meet the needs of trafficking victims they serve on a daily basis.

I would also like to enter into the record, with unanimous consent, a statement that was submitted by a coalition of nearly two dozen organizations in support of comprehensive reproductive health information and services for female victims of human trafficking. These organizations all fully support HHS's decision in this case.

Mr. Chairman, at the broadest level, I believe Congress should do as much as possible to enhance efforts to combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Indeed, at our last hearing, you stated that this is an area where "there is never enough attention by Congress." I hope we can work together in a bipartisan manner, and I believe I speak for the entire Committee when I commend our witnesses for the work that each of them performs.