

Testimony of:

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Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Noelle Hunter, president and co-founder of iStand Parent Network Inc. On behalf of families of internationally-abducted children and the Coalition to End International Parental Child Abduction, we welcome members of Congress, congressional staff, parents, and guests to Congress United for Action: Strive to Return America's Stolen Children.

International Parental Child Abduction, IPCA, is a crime against American children and families. It is a pernicious problem that has separated thousands of children from loving parents, siblings and communities. For too long, parents operated in isolation, seeking the return of their children against formidable bureaucratic, institutional, domestic and international constraints. Today, however, parents are standing as a united constituency to engage with Congress, local, state and federal agencies, and international actors to press for the return of our children and for meaningful public policy reform to prevent and end IPCA.

Over the past few years, this amplified advocacy for America's Stolen Children has caused Congress to pay closer attention to, and engage more vigorously for, internationally-abducted children. We are seeing more members regard abduction foremost as a casework matter, assisting parents in overcoming challenges with federal agencies and also engaging directly with representatives of foreign nations in which their vulnerable constituents are held. While responsiveness to this issue has increased in some federal agencies, other agencies, including the U.S. Department of State, continue to prioritize diplomatic relations over children, mislead Congress on the true scope of the problem, and underutilize legislation which this body intended as a remedy.

Out of these competing policy aims, a new, robust spirit of cooperation is coalescing around an inherently bipartisan issue. In 2014, Congress unanimously enacted the International Child Abduction Prevention and Return Act, also known as the Goldman Act, giving the State Department more tools to return children and to hold nations accountable and directing other federal agencies to coordinate and improve response. In 2018 and 2019, the U.S. Senate passed resolutions by unanimous consent setting aside the month of April to raise awareness of, and opposition to, International Parental Child Abduction.

Congressional staff are forging an informal network to manage constituent relationships and to advise their members on challenges and solutions for this problem. As stated in his welcoming remarks, together with Senator Dianne Feinstein, Senator Tillis is set to introduce legislation intended to further improve federal agency response, identify additional resources to help nongovernmental organizations fight for children, and empower parents to bring their children home. It will take a whole-of-government response to reform this issue, and Congress is leading the way.

In that spirit, I would like to introduce Katharine Clark, counsel in Senator Feinstein's office, to accept the 2019 iStand Champion Award on the senator's behalf. The iStand Champion award recognizes a governmental actor who demonstrates exceptional leadership in resolving International Parental Child Abduction through public policy reform.