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**Testimony of Raymond Bechard
Connecticut General Assembly
Judiciary Committee
March 19, 2012**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Coleman, Chairman Fox, and Committee members.

My name is Raymond Bechard. I am the author of a book called, "The Berlin Turnpike: A True Story of Human Trafficking in America." I'm here to urge your passage of Bill 5504, An Act Concerning Commercial Sexual Exploitation of a Minor.

I'll start by telling you how the research for the book relates to my testimony. It tells the story of a landmark federal trial which took place here in Hartford in 2007. The case of United States vs. Dennis Paris provides a rare and detailed account of how a specific type of human trafficking – called *commercial sexual exploitation* - is thriving because it has left the street corners and entered our homes. This one case contains every element of a crime so reliant on secrecy; shrouded behind a scintillating veil of growing legitimacy. Yet it is buried just below the surface of our culture's mainstream perception.

The myth is that human trafficking of this kind disguises itself as a different monster; an evil face that is easy to recognize. The truth is far more devious and complex. In the shadows of our daily lives, this silent explosion of crime and abuse hides behind a deceptive mask of false innocence and legitimacy

Among other crimes, Dennis Paris was convicted of "sex trafficking of a minor," and is now serving a thirty year sentence in federal prison. One of the girls he victimized, through what he called an "Escort" service, was only sixteen years old. Another of his victims, again sold to men in and around Hartford through his "Escort" service, was just fourteen.

During his trial these girls courageously testified to the abuse, drug use, violence, degradation and life-long wounds they suffered at the hands of Dennis Paris and the "Escort" business he ran throughout Connecticut for years.

Along with the stories of these young girls, Federal Prosecutor's also revealed the truth about the *Hartford Advocate's* "escort" advertisements. The *Advocate*, which is owned by the Tribune Company's *Hartford Courant*, was cited over 60 times during the trial as Paris's exclusive channel for selling his girls. The *Advocate's* "escort" section was the only thing Dennis Paris needed to find men willing to pay him money to have sex with his victims.

Now, nearly five years after the trial in which the Department of Justice proved that the *Advocate's* "escort" advertisements often feature the commercial sexual exploitation of minors, the paper continues running dozens of these advertisements every week.

An example from this week's edition, which I picked up from a display rack here in the Legislative Office Building, reads: "Sasha & Milani 2 GIRL Specials Petite & Busty Come indulge in all your Fetishes And Desires. GFE & GREEK AVAILABLE. NO RUSH. TOYS AVAILABLE." Phone number.

The complicity surrounding human trafficking runs deep in Connecticut. And the *Advocate* is in not alone in the marketing of flesh here. Backpage.com, a website owned by Village Voice Media, began running online "escort" ads in Connecticut last November. A Backpage ad posted this morning in the Hartford Escort Listings reads: "Ready for an Action Packed Experience? Two GIRL SPECIAL AVAILABLE!!! NEW TO TOWN!!! DONT MISS THE FUN WITH ME AND MY SEXY SEDUCTRESS!! GIVE US A CALL and ask for NIKKI THE GUZZLER."

In today's *New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristoff writes that, "Backpage accounts for about 70 percent of prostitution advertising ads in the United States, earning more than \$22 million annually from" the ads.

Further, a magazine called *Extreme New England* lists advertisements for "escort" services in several northeastern states and New York. It also features "want" ads which continually look for new recruits for these organizations. The magazine is published in Kensington, Connecticut.

Let me be clear, this new legislation would make all those involved criminally liable for running "escort" advertisements from anyone using minors for paid sex. To prevent going to jail, anyone taking money for these ads would have to verify the age of everyone employed by the "escort" agencies.

Right now you have the opportunity to seriously address sex trafficking in Connecticut by passing H.B. 5504. The law will make publishers "guilty of commercial sexual exploitation of a minor" if they run "escort" ads involving anyone under the age of 18. The law is aimed directly at "escort" advertisements like those carried regularly in the *Advocate* Newspapers, Kensington based *Extreme New England* Magazine, and on websites like Backpage.com.

These "escort" agencies have proven to be nothing but a front for those who are often guilty of the commercial exploitation of minors and young adults.

I know much of this information may be new. Certainly, this is a complex issue. But I urge you to strongly consider passing this important legislation. It will protect the future of countless young people in Connecticut by reducing the demand from all those who seek to destroy their lives.

Thank you.