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**Department of the Attorney General and the Department of Human Services Join
with Law Enforcement and Local Agencies on Child Recovery Operation**

HONOLULU – The Department of the Attorney General and the Hawai'i Department of Human Services today announced the results of a joint child recovery operation in Honolulu.

Operation "Shine the Light" is a cooperative effort between federal, state and local agencies, including four non-profit organizations. The lead agencies worked with the Federal Bureau of Investigations, U.S. Marshalls, U.S. Secret Service, Homeland Security Investigations, Honolulu Police Department, Susannah Wesley Community Center, Hale Kipa, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the National Child Protection Task Force on this joint task force centered on the recovery of endangered and runaway foster youth over the weekend.

The operation resulted in five children being recovered, between the ages of 16-17.

There are a number of custodial interference, child endangerment, and trafficking investigations ongoing.

"This cooperative operation between Federal, State, and local agencies is a first of its kind in Hawai'i and an incredibly important milestone in our efforts to combat the exploitation of our youth," said Hawai'i Attorney General Clare E. Connors. "We are committed to finding those who exploit, target and traffic children in our state, and I am grateful to our partners as well as proud of our dedicated public servants for their tireless fight."

There's a misconception that runaways choose to leave their placement, but the truth is it's a much more complicated issue. This operation was at the intersection of ICAC TF partner and child welfare services and was designed with one goal in mind: to show our foster kids that we see you and to remind them that their lives matter.

The Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force ("ICAC") and the Missing Child Center-Hawai'i ("MCCH") are both within the Department of the Attorney General. Hawaii ICAC is part of a nationwide network of task forces dedicated to protecting children in the online environment. It accomplishes this goal through education, investigation and prosecution. MCCH operates as the State's missing children clearinghouse and a resource for law enforcement, social services, and families.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in decreased opportunities for concerned citizens and mandatory reporters to recognize and report signs of child abuse and neglect. Perpetrators and traffickers target vulnerable children: runaway youth from the foster care system; children who have been physically or sexually abused; and youth experiencing substance abuse or homelessness.

"It is an undeniable and unfortunate reality that this pandemic has highlighted the increased risk of exploitation for our most vulnerable youth. It takes collaborative strategy, swift action, and an utmost care for these youth in order to respond to their needs," said Cathy Betts, Hawai'i Department of Human Services Director. "I am proud of our child welfare services team for the hard work that they do and for their collaborative spirit in taking on this project. The success of this project is a reminder to all of our workers that their efforts matter and have an impact on the lives of others."

Systems have been working at capacity, especially during this pandemic. But through interagency collaboration, streamlining efforts and working collectively and synchronously, the task force was able to recover the children and hold adults accountable for their actions.

Eli S. Miranda, Special Agent in Charge at the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Honolulu Field Office shared, "The FBI will leverage the full extent of its resources to protect our children in Hawaii. We will continue working with all our partner agencies and members of the public to reunite missing children with their families." Miranda went on to say, "As part of the law enforcement community, the FBI is unwavering in its commitment to protecting our keiki from dangerous predators that attempt to exploit our most innocent and vulnerable citizens."

"Runaway youth are at a high risk of being trafficked, especially in a high cost of living area such as Hawaii. It's difficult for them to afford basic needs such as food and shelter. Traffickers take advantage of this fact, exploiting vulnerable young people by forcing them to exchange sex for a place to stay or something to eat," said Lucia Cabral-DeArmas, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the Homeland Security Investigations Honolulu field office. "Combatting human trafficking is part of the core mission of HSI, and we are proud to partner with the ICAC task force to bring our keiki in from the streets where they are vulnerable to this type of exploitation."

Although this operation has led to a positive outcome, there are many more children who may fall prey to sex traffickers and online predators. With distance learning, and the decrease of sports and summer school programs, this pandemic has increased the amount of time that youth spend on the internet.

Community members can help to combat child abuse, exploitation and sex trafficking.

Contact the Department of Human Services to report:

Suspected child abuse or neglect: (808) 832-5300 or (toll free) 1-888-380-3088

Suspected child trafficking: (808) 832-1999 or (toll free) 1-888-398-1188

Education, training, and awareness are paramount to being able to protect our keiki. We cannot combat the epidemic of child exploitation without partnering with our community. Anyone with information regarding missing children or the exploitation of children is encouraged to contact your local police department or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

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