

**Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
Special Committee on Aging**

“Still Ringing Off the Hook: An Update on Efforts to Combat Robocalls”

October 4, 2017

Good morning. A couple of years ago, one of my most valued staff members retired after more than 30 years of public service. She served as staff director right here on the Senate Aging Committee, where she organized many hearings examining robocalls and senior fraud. She tells me, however, that it wasn't until she retired, and is now home during the day, that she fully realized the problem of robocalls. From morning til night, she says her phone rings – often with threatening scam artists on the other end of the line.

When Congress created the National Do-Not-Call list 14 years ago, we hoped it would end this flood of unwelcome phone calls. Despite some initial success, phones are still ringing off the hook.

Last year, Americans received an estimated 2.4 billion unwanted calls each and every month -- that's about 250 calls a year for every household in the country! My husband and I received so many on our landline in Bangor that we discontinued the landline.

This morning, we will look at why Americans who have signed up for the Do-Not-Call registry are still getting annoying, unwanted phone calls, on both their landlines and their cell phones, and we will explore what can be done about it. We will focus especially on the importance of education, enforcement, and call-blocking technologies.

In previous hearings on this topic, we learned that changes in technology have made it possible for scammers operating overseas to use automated dialing – or robocalls – to reach victims here in the United States.

This was not feasible in 2003. At that time, phone calls were routed through telecommunications equipment that was complicated to operate. This made high-volume, automated calling difficult and expensive, particularly for international calls. Also, older equipment could not be used easily to disguise or “spoof” a caller ID.

But now, phone calls can be routed from anywhere in the world at practically no cost using so-called “Voice Over-Internet Protocol” technology – or “VoIP”. Combined with simple computer apps, criminals can use VoIP to generate millions of robocalls to cast a wide net in their hunt for victims. They can even “spoof” the number displayed by

caller-ID to hide their true identity, making it more likely that their intended victim will pick up the phone.

But just as technology has enabled these frauds, it can also be used to fight back. Today, we will learn about technologies consumers can use to block illegal robocalls. We will also hear about the Robocall Strike Force, a collaboration between telecommunications and technology companies that are working together on ways to identify robocall traffic at the network level and block it before it even reaches the consumer. We will assess whether or not the telecoms are doing enough, quickly enough, to protect their customers.

Aggressive law enforcement is also key to stopping illegal robocalls. In a case brought by the Department of Justice last year, dozens of individuals operating through call centers in India were indicted for allegedly defrauding tens of thousands of Americans out of hundreds of millions of dollars, using the notorious IRS impersonation scam – that is the most commonly reported scam to our committee’s Fraud Hotline.

Our own data show that these arrests had a real impact. Prior to the arrests, nearly three out of four calls to our Hotline involved the IRS impersonation scam. But in the three months after the arrests, reports of the scam dropped an incredible 94 percent. Though the numbers have since rebounded somewhat, they are still far below the levels we have seen in the past. The point is -- law enforcement works. It deters others from committing the crime.

If we are going to win this fight, we need to better our understanding of these con artists and their scams and how they operate. What we learn will help inform those who are most at risk, particularly our older Americans, so that they don’t fall victim to these scams. The witnesses who are testifying today have invaluable insights, and I look forward to their testimony.

It is now a pleasure to turn to Ranking Member Casey for his opening statement.