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PENNSYLVANIA

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JOINT ECONOMIC

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

May 26, 2009

Dear Secretary Clinton,

I am writing you today out of concern for foreign exchange students who were placed in unsanitary homes in Pennsylvania and what it means for the welfare of our nation's youth exchange programs. It has recently come to my attention that nine foreign exchange students between the ages of 15 and 18 are now in the care of the Lackawanna County Department of Human Services in Pennsylvania. According to news reports and local officials, these students were removed from the homes of unsuitable host families because they were found to be living in unsanitary conditions. Lackawanna County officials report to us that some children were in need of medical attention due to malnutrition and dehydration, while others were living in unsanitary conditions, including one living in a home recently condemned by local safety inspectors.

These reports are extremely disturbing. According to a news report, a 15 year-old girl from Nigeria was living in a house that was filled with dog feces. The student reportedly was living with the Area Coordinator of the sponsoring organization, the same person responsible for ensuring that other host families were living up to their obligations. A reporter visited the house, confirmed the exchange student's allegations, and found dirt and feces throughout the house. The conditions to which this student was subjected are simply unacceptable.

It is my understanding that both the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), under the Department of Homeland Security, share responsibility for overseeing and implementing youth exchange programs. Through an independent third party – the Council on Standards for International Education Travel – the State Department provides accreditation and audits for private and non-profit international educational travel and youth exchange programs (also referred to as sponsors) on an annual basis. The USCIS Student and Exchange Visitor Program is responsible for tracking and monitoring foreign exchange students, schools and programs as long as they reside in America. When allegations of abuse arise, according to the secondary

cc: Miller Crouch, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

school student guidelines issued by the State Department, it is the sponsor's responsibility to report and notify the incidents directly to the Department of State.

While we can hope that this matter is an isolated one, it raises serious concerns about the accreditation and oversight of sponsoring agencies and, ultimately, about the system's effectiveness in ensuring the health and safety of foreign exchange students. I am concerned that the current oversight system is reactive, rather than proactive, and that it permits the ongoing abuse of foreign students without any effective intervention until the situation is dire. The Lackawanna County situation came to the attention of local authorities only after teachers in the Scranton Area School District voiced their concerns.

Therefore, I request that your Department answer the following questions:

- The Council on Standards for International Education Travel (CSIET) is the independent nonprofit organization that reviews sponsors on an annual basis and provides a public list of those who have received accreditation. How does the Department of State determine whether the audits performed by CSIET meet agency regulations? How often, if at all, does the Department of State perform checks on the various sponsors approved by CSIET?
- Sponsors are required to "exercise due diligence" to ensure that the host families are screened properly and are found satisfactory. The Department of State has previously stated that "a mere superficial compliance with this regulatory requirement will not be tolerated." If it is determined that an approved sponsor has failed to demonstrate due diligence in their host family selection process, what are the consequences for that sponsor?
- How much contact, if any, does the State Department have with sponsors? With CSIET?
- Are sponsors required to make home visits with students and their host families? If so, how many times must a sponsor visit the home during a student's stay?
- If a sponsor loses its accreditation, is the sponsor allowed to reapply for accreditation the following year, if at all? If so, what steps must a sponsor take to have its accreditation restored?
- How many Department of State employees work on youth exchange programs?

I am supportive of the cultural and educational exchange programs the Department of State promotes and funds. As you know, such exchange opportunities help dispel negative images of the United States, convey our nation's best attributes, and foster stronger partnerships across the globe. At their best, they can be an effective tool in achieving the President's and your goal of restoring respect for the U.S. abroad. It is for these reasons that I am deeply concerned about allegations of abuse and mistreatment of foreign exchange students. Yet, I am most concerned about the young people subjected to such treatment. They journeyed to our country to experience

the American way of life and broaden their opportunities, only to be forced to live in unsanitary and unsafe conditions.

Stories like those emanating from Lackawanna County tarnish our reputation and undermine the mission of youth exchange programs. I look forward to hearing your responses and working with you on guaranteeing the safety and welfare of foreign exchange students in the United States.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bob Casey, Jr." in a cursive style.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.