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Call 116 000 – efforts to save missing children

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Missing Children conference: Closing the gaps - 116 000 hotlines and child abduction alert systems

Brussels, 30 May 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We've all seen heartbreaking news stories of missing children. Families and friends in a torment of uncertainty, huge public concern, vast police resources. No person seeing such stories can remain unmoved; whole populations are determined to do whatever they can to help.

In that environment, Member States aren't doing enough. 10 of them have failed their citizens, by not fulfilling their legal duty to have a hotline up and running.

And too few Europeans know exactly what they can do. In the 17 Member States that do have a hotline running – and soon, I hope, in all of them – all you have to do is dial 116 000. Whether you're a parent whose child has gone missing – a child who's got lost or run away – or you have information about a missing child. All you have to do dial that one number, and you can connect to an experienced organisation able to provide support and practical assistance, whether psychological, legal or administrative. Even if you want to speak confidentially.

Isn't that useful? I think it is: and a recent survey shows that 91% of Europeans agree. But that overwhelming support is not translating into awareness.

Even where the number is operational, only one in five people feel they have enough information. Again, Member States need more action to boost that awareness.

In the last year we've made some progress to protect children.

First, you may remember that this time last year I announced a major new initiative to make the Internet a better place for kids. We've now presented that. Our strategy, set out a few weeks ago, looks, first, at how to encourage quality content and services for kids. Second, how to improve digital literacy, safety and awareness. Third, giving children and parents easy tools for a safe online environment. And fourth, fighting online material relating to the sexual abuse of children.

Because self-regulation will be a key part, we have also launched a coalition from all sectors of the industry. A platform of commitment and cooperation, with concrete first results due before the summer.

And second, we've made progress on the 116 000 hotline. For one thing the Commission launched its own website with more information about the situation of the hotlines, and other useful information.

Plus, we have done some great work with the telecom and mobile industry, and have seen a lot of helpful cooperation from them. With action led by the GSM Association, a dozen operators will boost awareness to a potential audience of over 250 million citizens. From Internet campaigns to text messages to information attached to bills. Some, like Base and Proximus here in Belgium have already put 116000 as a default numbers on the SIM; others are promoting in other ways.

This is important and vital work. And indeed that's consistent with the corporate social responsibility that telecom operators show in other areas.

But we need to see more action. Particularly from Member States.

In the last year, some have made progress. But still, one year after the deadline to implement and over 5 years since our original legal decision on 116, 10 Member States have still not made the number operational. Indeed 3 Member States - Finland, Latvia and Lithuania - have not even assigned the number yet! That's too many people, too many millions, unable to benefit. And I don't find that acceptable.

And even once the hotline is operational, it remains a legal obligation on Member States to promote and raise awareness about it.

To those Member States yet to make this hotline work, and to those where awareness is still low, I am today urging you to take the steps needed. To do anything else is not just a legal breach, it is failing your citizens' expectations. We are ready to support, through technical contacts, through Commission financial assistance, and through sharing best practices – looking at places where this has been done particularly effectively, like in Belgium, France, Hungary, or Poland. But it is Member States who need to take that final step.

We must do what we can to help missing children and their families. All Europe expects it.