

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 25, 2018

The Honorable Jeff Sessions
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20530

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Attorney General Sessions and Secretary Azar:

We write to draw your attention to a troubling new form of domestic abuse: the use of internet-connected home devices to track, harass and control victims. Last month, in an article titled “Thermostats, Locks and Lights: Digital Tools of Domestic Abuse,” the *New York Times* detailed several instances of this type of abuse and highlighted areas where our victim services and the legal system may be ill-equipped to respond to abuse that employs newly developed technologies. With more people using connected home devices every day, and the capabilities of these devices rapidly increasing, it is imperative that we ensure that victims, law enforcement, social workers and other legal and medical professionals have the knowledge and resources they need to recognize, address and prevent this kind of abuse.

The last several years have seen an explosion in internet-connected devices, from refrigerators and thermostats to house alarms and digital assistants. The adoption of these technological advancements shows no sign of slowing down, as these devices revolutionize a variety of everyday tasks across the United States and the world. Yet for victims of domestic abuse, the convenience offered by connected devices can become a web of manipulation and harassment. Many of the domestic abuse victims, lawyers, shelter workers and emergency responders interviewed by the *Times* gave disturbing examples of abuse perpetrated with this technology. The manager of a victims’ shelter, for example, described a victim whose abuser remotely increased their home’s thermostat to over 100 degrees, as well as another victim whose smart speakers would suddenly play loud music. Other victims report their partners watching and listening to them remotely via web-connected cameras and microphones in order to monitor and control their every move.

The goals of these behaviors—power and control over victims—are no different from the motivations in traditional abuse cases. Connected devices, however, provide abusers with means to easily exploit that power dynamic and enable remote and relentless abuse. Abusers controlling

connected devices can use them to manipulate victims into feeling as though they are mentally ill or they have lost control of their home. In some cases, only one person in a relationship understands and has access to a home's connected devices, making it difficult for victims to understand what is happening, let alone regain control of the situation. And even victims who are able to deactivate or retake control of devices risk escalating the conflict.

To make the issue more challenging, the recourse available to victims of technology-enabled abuse is sorely lacking. Seeking help in any domestic abuse situation creates a risk of retaliation from the abuser, but it can be much more difficult or even impossible when an abuser can use connected devices to watch and listen to the victim at all times. Furthermore, even when legal recourse is successfully sought out, many of these harassing behaviors may not be covered by traditional restraining orders. Victims' lawyers are "wrangling with how to add language to restraining orders to cover smart home technology," the *Times* writes. The law simply has not caught up to the potential of connected home devices to be misused.

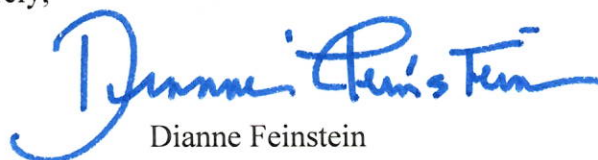
To address the novel threats of harassment and manipulation posed by these devices, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should take steps to make updated resources and assistance available to victims, law enforcement, judicial personnel and other professionals who assist victims of domestic abuse. We encourage DOJ and HHS to help arm victims with the knowledge they need by making information publicly available on their websites, as well as through direct service providers such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline. We also encourage your departments to include information about connected device abuse in the training materials and technical assistance provided to grant recipients and state partners. As technology advances and poses new practical and legal concerns, we must ensure that we are keeping pace to address and prevent domestic abuse, no matter what form it takes.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator




Patty Murray
United States Senator




Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

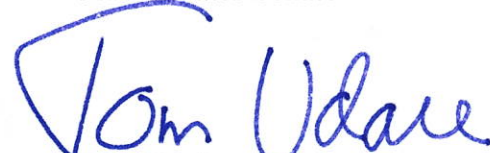

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

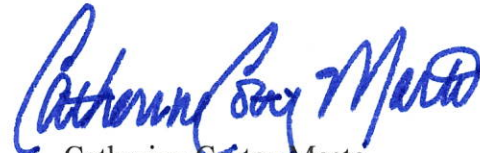

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

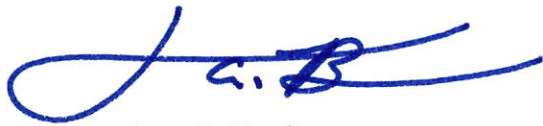

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

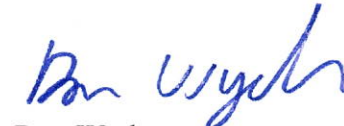

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator


Tom Udall
United States Senator


Tina Smith
United States Senator


Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator


Cory A. Booker
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator