

**Testimony of Nelson Wells, Sr.
Congressional-Executive Commission on China
September 22, 2026**

Good morning, Chair Sullivan and Co-Chair Smith and the esteemed members of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

Thank you for inviting me and by extension my wife, Cynthia Wells, and our partner in this fight, Tim Hunt, brother of Dawn Michelle Hunt—and now our brother. One of the best things that came out of the hearing in 2024 was the joining of our families in the fight to bring our loved ones home. And so I thank the Commission, and particularly Chair Smith, for your championship of Nelson Wells, Jr. and Dawn.

For those who don't know me, I am the proud father of Nelson Wells, Jr. I am proud, but I am heartbroken. His mother, Cynthia, and I come to the leaders of the United States government and the Chinese government—as we have done for more than 12 years, pleading for the release of our son, who has been imprisoned in China since 2014.

In the Spring of that year, we were awakened in the middle of the night by a call that no parent ever wants to receive. Paraphrasing, the male caller said, “I’m a friend of Nelson’s. He’s in trouble. He’s been arrested in China. Do you have money? Hurry up! They’re going to kill him!” Naturally, I said, “hang that phone up.” I thought it was a prank, a scam. We didn’t even realize Nelson, then a 40-year-old man, was in China.

We thought he was at home in Japan, where we had recently spoken to him by phone, and he had been living with his second wife and children. Nelson is the father of two daughters and a son and still has a close relationship with his first wife. They and our entire family stand with me in this testimony. My son is a good man.

I served in the United States Army for 20 years, and Cynthia served at the Department of Defense for nearly 28 years. We have been stationed and traveled all over the United States—from the South to the South Pacific—and the world. At each opportunity, we brought our children, Nelson and his sister, Kendria Wells, with us. Thus, Nelson always had a love for travel, and it was not unusual to us that he settled in Japan, where his wife is from. But due to a medical condition resulting from a traffic accident, we were discussing the possibility of the family relocating to the United States permanently. The goal was for him to get better treatment and expand his professional opportunities. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

After the call—after not having heard from him, we called his wife, our daughter-in-law and learned that he had taken a trip to China and had in fact been arrested. We had no idea where he was.

Over the next several weeks and months, we reached out to the United States Embassy multiple times to find Nelson or a record of his arrest, but they could not locate him. It was not until we took matters into our own hands and contacted John Kamm at the Dui Hua Foundation, which tracks and assists U.S. detainees overseas. We were able to confirm that Nelson had indeed been arrested. We think that somehow, he had not been considered an American citizen, even though he, his wife, and his children all are citizens, and had fallen through the cracks. Only then did the U.S. Government begin working on behalf of our son. By then, precious months had passed.



For Nelson's part, he had been incarcerated all that time in China, a country where he was only visiting, where he did not read or speak the language, and where he did not know if we were looking for him or even knew he had been arrested. It must have been torture for him. It was not until a Chinese lawyer we hired appeared at one of his court proceedings and informed him that we knew of his predicament. The lawyer could not represent Nelson, but he was able to provide him with a lifeline.

Frightened and desperate to reach out to us and unfamiliar with the documents he was being presented, Nelson was willing to do anything to improve his conditions, even plead partial guilt so that he could enter the prison system and be allowed phone calls home, more regular contact with American Citizen Services, and other benefits. It was at that time that we were able to speak with our son, albeit on short calls that were heavily monitored and would disconnect abruptly when he attempted to share sensitive details about his treatment or condition or when we would express our own frustration.

We learned that Nelson had been arrested on a drug charge. As he was leaving the country, he naively agreed to carry a bag of what he thought to be baked goods for a so-called friend through security at the airport. Those baked goods were allegedly laced with illegal drugs. That so-called friend made it through, but Nelson did not.

For that one mistake—that one betrayal, his life, his wife's life, his children's lives, and our lives will never be the same.

Nelson originally received a life sentence, but that sentence was ultimately reduced in 2019 to 22 years; however, his sentence did not include time served. He also recently applied for and received another reduction in sentence by a few months, and we are thankful to the Chinese government for that. This still means that Nelson will not be released until 2041 when he is in his late 60s, if by some miracle he survives.

In the years since 2014, my wife and I have become consumed with efforts to secure Nelson's release and to ensure his safety and health while imprisoned. At first, we did not have access to trusted lawyers or advisors that we could count on to advocate for Nelson and not take advantage of us. We expended almost all our savings in those early years via trial-and-error efforts to help Nelson and without meaningful guidance from our own government. With the exception of some former prisoners who were able to get messages to us and third-party advocates, we were virtually alone and operating in the blind. For years, we wrote letters to our members of Congress, to the White House, to State Department officials, to Democrats and Republicans, to anyone who was in a position of influence, but our calls for assistance went unanswered.

American Citizen Services in Beijing was helpful in visiting, calling, communicating with, and reporting back on Nelson, but some case officers were better than others and they changed frequently. In recent years, due in part to our advocacy, Nelson has received better case officers who have truly cared for his health and wellbeing, but no matter how good or how well-meaning, with each swap of a case officer, it feels like we, like Nelson is starting all over—having to re-tell his story, re-teach his spoken and unspoken language, and recount his mental and physical health challenges. These officers also must reestablish relationships with the prison officials. The inconsistency has taken its toll on him, as have the years of incarceration.

While in the beginning, we heeded warnings not to shine a public light on Nelson's story out of fear of retaliation against him, his declining health has forced us to escalate our efforts to share his story and gain attention for him in the hopes of mounting political and public pressure and ultimately diplomatic intervention.

Over the years, Nelson has been targeted as one of the few Americans and the only Black American in the prison, which has exposed him to harsher treatment and sometimes physical attack. He has suffered from debilitating chronic pain, seizures (a Chinese MRI report shows he has brain atrophy), malnutrition, internal issues, dental pain, severe depression and thoughts of self-harm. We also know that based on family history, he needs regular cancer and heart health screenings. And now, as of a few weeks ago, we discovered that he has been diagnosed with Hepatitis C—the news of which has devastated Nelson and our family.

The news has hit him hard and has renewed our concerns about his mental health and stability. We are working with him to remain strong, especially on the eve of this second meeting between President Xi and President Trump, but it is hard for him, for us to remain hopeful as the years pass.

We have pulled together a team of advocates and experts, including a friend of this committee, Peter Humphrey, who was a former Chinese prisoner and now assists families in our situation. We have teamed up with Tim Hunt, who is here today testifying on behalf of his sister Dawn Michelle. We have done endless interviews by journalists in the United States and China. We have appealed to President Biden and President Trump, and to Ambassadors Burns and Perdue, respectively, and our entire Louisiana delegation, including Speaker Johnson. I will note that we are especially thankful to Senator Bill Cassidy and his team, who, like Congressman Smith, have been our champions in Congress.

We are also thankful to the Commission for inviting us here today to share our story and your personal and collective advocacy with the Biden and now Trump Administration on behalf of Nelson and Dawn, including introducing the *Nelson Wells Jr. and Dawn Michelle Hunt Unjustly Detained in Communist China Act*.

For their part, the Trump Administration—more than the Biden Administration—has gotten very engaged in Nelson's case on the ground, facilitating meetings with more senior-level U.S. officials in China and sending China an official request for humanitarian release. For that, we thank them, but we need more.

We have done all that we can as a team, as a family, as parents. What we need now is something we have yet to have and what we feel is the only thing that will make a difference.

We need President Donald Trump, our President, a father himself to personally advocate on Nelson's behalf to President Xi when the two meet this week. We have come a long way and are at the last mile. We believe that he—and perhaps only he—can bring Nelson, can bring Dawn home.

When our country asked us to serve, my wife and I did so unreservedly and without hesitation. I even served hardship posts, including during the Gulf War. President Trump, now I am asking for your help—father to father—on behalf of my child. He is a man, but as every parent here knows, he is still my child, and I cannot leave him behind. I am asking you also not to leave him—an American citizen—behind.

And to President Xi, if you are listening, you are a father as well, and I ask that you be receptive to President Trump, to America's request. There is no further gain to Nelson remaining and dying in prison. There is no justice in our never seeing him again. He has served long enough.

Please have mercy on him, on our family, on Dawn's family and return them home. Our deepest hope is that they will come home, alive and together, this year.

Nelson's youngest daughter is just 12 years old and has never seen her father outside of photographs. She prays every night for him—and for someone who can help bring him home. We believe that you, President Trump, and President Xi can be those people.

On behalf of my son and all the sons and daughters who are still incarcerated on foreign soil, thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering your questions during and after the hearing for the record.

Learn more about Nelson and follow our story at www.nelsonwellsjr.com

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Nelson A. Wells". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.