

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE HEARING

DOMESTIC MINOR SEX TRAFFICKING

SEPTEMBER 15, 2010

TESTIMONY OF CONGRESSWOMAN JACKIE SPEIER

Thank you Mr. Chairman, members of the committee for holding this hearing today in response to the call from myself and more than twenty of my colleagues who want this nation stand up to this human tragedy: **as many as 300,000 children are sexually enslaved in our country every year.**

Over the past five months I have literally immersed myself in this issue. I have met with district attorney's, FBI agents, representatives of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, countless victims, advocates and even the CEO of Craigslist. Just a few weeks ago I did a police ride along in Oakland, California- a city that is badly infected with child prostitution.

From these experiences I know this- Houston, we have a big problem. And it's not just Houston, or Oakland. It is also Atlanta, Las

Vegas, New York, and San Francisco. It is alive and well in every city in this country. We have, quite literally, taken our eyes off the ball.

There are reasons for this perfect storm. First- the internet . Before the internet those who wanted to purchase sex with underage children had to venture outside of their homes- subjecting themselves to potential arrest and public stigma. Today, perpetrators hide behind their personal computers and have a child at their doorstep with a click of button.

Between 2004 and 2008 child prostitution complaints originating from the internet increased by 1000 percent– and that’s just the number of complaints, not total volume. Further, websites are literally immune from being held liable for their role in these crimes. In an effort to fuel innovation, Congress passed the Communications Decency Act in 1996. Today, websites escape liability even when an ad on their site results in child prostitution, rape or death.

I am pleased to see that a representative of Craigslist is here today. Thinly disguised ads for sex on Craigslist received three times as

many responses as ads placed on other sites. The recent shutdown of the adult services section on Craigslist was a step in the right direction, although Craigslist still offers adult services in areas outside of the United States. Recent reports have speculated that the ads that previously appeared on the adult services section will migrate to other portions of the site. Let the company not forget that they control the activity on their website. If they are truly committed to this issue they will exercise all due diligence necessary.

That said, Craigslist is certainly not the lone wolf. The activity taking place on myredbook.com, eros.com and Backpage is equally as horrific. These sites are facilitating crimes and we must consider an effective response within the confines of the First Amendment.

Second, in an era of competing priorities, we have turned a blind eye to the magnitude of this problem. Even though The Trafficking Victims Protection Act imposes lifetime sentences on those convicted of trafficking, it is rarely used in prosecutions. During a seven year period, 60 percent of child sexual exploitation cases presented to the US Attorney's offices were declined for prosecution. In contrast, just

15 percent of drug trafficking and 26 percent of weapons charges were declined. Our priorities are clearly out of balance and perpetrators are taking advantage. In fact, a pimp selling just four children can earn over \$600,000 per year. Today, we live in a country where a person is more likely to serve time for selling marijuana than a 14 year old girl.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, where my district is located, only one FBI agent is assigned to work with local law enforcement and the US Attorney's office in the name of curtailing sex trafficking.

Further, the inability to bring traffickers to justice is directly tied to inadequate victim services. Girls who are rescued from prostitution typically come from abusive family situations. In fact, between 60 and 90 percent have experienced physical or sexual abuse. Victims will rarely report the identity of his or her trafficker because they fear retaliation, or they are simply dependent on their pimp for survival. These children have been traumatized, brainwashed and abandoned and need specialized resources for a successful recovery. It is a

travesty that only five residential facilities specific to this population exist across the country.

Again, I thank the committee for holding this hearing today and for elevating a dialogue that currently involves far too few people.