

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 23, 2012

Mr. Jim Larkin
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Village Voice Media Holdings, LLC
1201 E. Jefferson St.
Phoenix, AZ 85034

Dear Mr. Larkin:

Our founding fathers guaranteed the freedom of expression in the United States Constitution, and as U.S. Senators, we work hard to defend this fundamental American value. However, the First Amendment has clear limitations – it does not extend to child pornography and it does not extend to the sexual exploitation of minors on the Internet.

Experts estimate that 300,000 children are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation in the United States, and that girls and boys are forced into prostitution at the average ages of 12 to 14 and 11 to 13, respectively. A chilling report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 40 percent of incidents investigated by federally funded task forces on human trafficking between 2008 and 2010 involved the sexual exploitation of a child. Unfortunately, these numbers only continue to rise.

We believe, as the leading U.S. website for prostitution advertising, Backpage.com can create a significant impact on this appalling industry by shutting off a major source of advertising for these practices – the adult services section of the website.

We are greatly alarmed by the increasing news reports of pimps and traffickers using Backpage.com to advertise sexual services by minors. The National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) found more than 50 instances nationwide of charges filed against people trafficking or attempting to traffic minors on Backpage.com. Recent child prostitution cases involving Backpage.com include:

- Myrelle and Tyrelle Lockett, pled guilty to trafficking of persons for forced labor or services in February 2011 for prostituting multiple Chicago area girls, including at least one who was underage. The girls were advertised on Backpage.com with rates as high as \$300 per hour.
- Kendel Morell, charged with human trafficking, rape and sexual exploitation of a child in October 2011 for forcing a 17-year-old Albuquerque girl into prostitution on Backpage.com.
- Demetrius Darnell Homer, convicted of sex trafficking of a minor and sentenced to 20 years in prison in August 2011 for violently forcing a 14-year-old Atlanta girl into prostitution and posting her services on Backpage.com. Homer kept the girl in line through beatings, threatening her with a knife, and on one occasion, shocking her with a taser in front of another underage girl he had placed in prostitution. Homer even forced the girl to engage in prostitution while she was pregnant with his child.

- Akmal S. Karon, a Minnesota man, charged with eight counts of child prostitution for pimping two underage girls and keeping them in line using rape and extreme violence. One girl, who first began working as a prostitute for Karon at 15, told police that Karon raped her, punched her in the face, repeatedly kicked her, burned her hand with a cigar, and once hit her in the head with a Snapple bottle when she did not earn enough money. Karon picked up the other girl outside her home just a few days before her 14th birthday. He raped and beat her the following day at a motel, and then held her captive for over a week, forcing her to work for him as a prostitute. Karon advertised both girls on Backpage.com.


We understand your company continues to ensure the public that employees are working closely to monitor the website, claiming to remove 400 ads that market the sexual exploitation of minors every month through a manual review process. But according to field experts and law enforcement authorities, these actions pale in comparison to the illegal activity facilitated via the website. NAAG maintains that the number of postings for prostitution services has not appeared to decrease since the issue was first raised with Village Voice Media. It took only minutes on Backpage.com's adult services section for us to find posts that present clear advertisements for prostitution of young girls.

It is clear from the increasing child trafficking cases linked to the website that the company is unable or unwilling to keep up with the sheer volume of these ads that garner an annual estimated profit of \$24 million. There is only one option to keep our children safe from exploitation on your advertising network – shut down the adult services section of Backpage.com.

We echo the sentiments of 51 Attorneys General, dozens of human rights and sexual assault organizations, *The Seattle Times*, faith leaders, and more than 90,000 Americans who signed a petition on this issue, and urge you in the strongest terms possible to follow Craigslist and remove the adult services section from Backpage.com.

We look forward to your swift response.


Sincerely,



Senator Mark Kirk



Senator Richard Blumenthal



Senator Marco Rubio

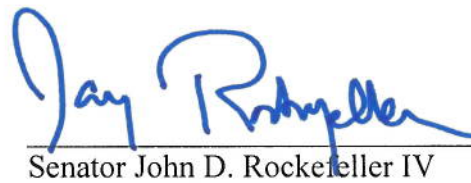


Senator Mark Begich


Senator Charles E. Grassley


Senator Patrick J. Leahy

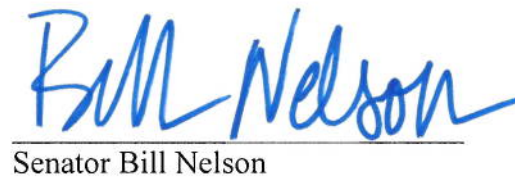

Senator John Boozman


Senator John D. Rockefeller IV


Senator John Cornyn

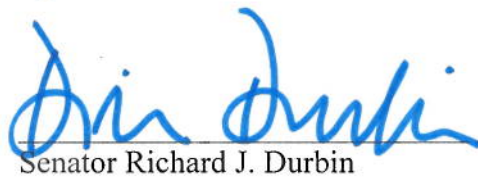

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