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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

October 23, 2013

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
The President
The White House
Washington DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

President Theodore Roosevelt famously coined the term “bully pulpit” in reference to the power of the presidency in shaping public opinion, informing the national debate and prioritizing the issues of the day.

As a parent and grandparent, I would urge you to use your bully pulpit, and the moral authority of the presidency, to publicly shame Web sites like Backpage.com, which time and again feature prominently in court cases involving the horrific sexual exploitation of children.

I understand that there are a variety of legal challenges involved in prosecuting the likes of Backpage.com—challenges which this Congress and this administration must continue to explore to ensure that law enforcement has the necessary tools to combat this growing in insidious problem. A recent *Washington Post* article sadly pointed out that gangs in Northern Virginia have concluded that trafficking young girls is actually more profitable than traditional criminal enterprises like drugs or weapons sales—in part because prostituted minors can be bought and sold multiple times.

In fact, on September 29, the *Washington Post* ran a major story regarding the increased frequency of gangs in Northern Virginia prostituting minors. The story highlighted a specific case in which “...the group prostituted women and high school girls in at least seven states, including Maryland and Virginia. It advertised services on the Web and had girls meet clients at hotels including the Homestead Studio Suites in Sterling, the Aloft hotel in Ashburn and the Washington Dulles Marriott Suites in Herndon.”

While I am heartened that this case and others like it have been brought, a problem of this scope will not be tackled through prosecutions alone. I believe it is critical that we embrace a holistic approach that includes public education, demand reduction and, importantly as it relates to Backpage.com, public shame.

A letter this summer signed by 47 of the nation’s state attorneys general, described the responsibility that Backpage.com and its ilk bears in the following way: “Every day, children in the United States are sold for sex. In instance after instance, State and local authorities discover

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that the vehicles for advertising the victims of the child sex trade to the world are online classified ad services, such as Backpage.com. The involvement of these advertising companies is not incidental—these companies have constructed their business models around income gained from participants in the sex trade.”

Is Backpage.com technically breaking existing law? The verdict is still out. Is Backpage.com serving as a conduit for the buying and selling of human beings, including children, to the tune of millions of dollars in profits a year? The answer, as indictment after indictment reveals, is a resounding yes.

I urge you to use the authority of your office to emphatically declare that those companies that choose profits over the welfare of our children and who claim ignorance when the evidence abounds are on notice. It is not too late to do so.

I urge you or your Attorney General Holder, within the next 30 days, to make a major policy address prioritizing this issue, and calling out, by name, companies like Backpage.com.

In this highly polarized political environment, I venture that nearly all Americans can agree that preventing the trafficking and exploitation of our children is a national priority, that those involved in this insidious criminal enterprise—be they the pimp, the john, the trafficker or the Web site that facilitates the trade— must be held to account, and that unfettered capitalism devoid of basic respect for human dignity is not an American value.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT

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