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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

June 8, 2012

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The Honorable and Mrs. Eric H. Holder, Jr.
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Ave NW Rm 5111
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Dear Attorney General Holder:

Thank you for your April 25 response to my April 4 letter regarding the department's efforts to combat human trafficking, or modern day slavery.

While I was pleased to hear that roughly two-thirds of U.S. Attorneys are presently participating in some form of anti-trafficking task forces in cooperation with other federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, civil society groups and service providers, it is imperative that the remaining one-third be similarly engaged, as is required by the consolidated appropriations bill signed into law last year. Your letter indicates that the department intends to issue a follow-up memorandum to all U.S. Attorneys regarding the congressional directive on human trafficking task forces. I request to be notified when that occurs and provided with a copy of the memorandum. Given that the House recently passed the FY 2013 Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations bill, it is imperative that the directives set forth in the FY 2012 bill be swiftly implemented.

As you note in your response, the other issue I raised in my initial correspondence with you was my outrage that Web sites like Backpage.com, which in case after case have been found to serve as a conduit for the buying and selling of human beings, including minors, appear to do so with impunity. Backpage.com and its parent company, Village Voice Media, seem impervious to public criticism and shame. Recently, several major advertisers have, to their credit, withdrawn their advertising from Backpage.com. Still the web site is unmoved to change its practice. In fact, in the enclosed May 17 *Bloomberg Businessweek* piece featuring Backpage.com's attorney Liz McDougall, she references a meeting with Backpage.com's executive editor Michael Lacey and CEO Jim Larkin in which they appealed to her to join their team by giving "their word that they are not going to back down on this." As such, I continue to believe that unless there is the very real prospect of criminal liability that Backpage.com will fail to change. In light of this reality, I requested that the department provide an analysis of whether there are sufficient laws on the books to prosecute the type of activity that Backpage.com engages in, and, if not, that the department provide a broader legal analysis and recommendations to Congress of legislative initiatives that may be undertaken to fully equip law enforcement to tackle this problem.

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Were the Justice Department to take a leadership role in this regard it would be in good company. Last August, 51 of the nation's attorneys general called on Village Voice Media to close the adult section of its web site. More than 500 faith leaders from varied religious traditions and more than 50 leading anti-trafficking experts and organizations have also lent their voice to this cause. And increasingly Members of Congress in both the House and the Senate are taking notice as are their constituents—nearly 250,000 Americans have signed an online petition urging Village Voice Media to “stop selling ads that others use to sell minors on Backpage.com by shutting down the Adult section of the website.” Momentum is building—now the Justice Department must act.

I recognize that these are complex legal questions, but surely we can agree that this is not a complex issue. Children ought not to be bought and sold online. Those who facilitate and enable this practice should have to face the consequences. I welcome the best legal analysis the Department can provide in how to ensure that this happens.

As the nation's chief law enforcement officer you must use your influence and your position to highlight this problem and to find solutions which ensure that innocents are not victimized and that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

FRW:ea

Bloomberg BusinessweekLifestyle**Liz McDougall on Defending Classified Ads for Erotic Services**

Posted on May 17, 2012

In the summer of 2008, a partner at our Seattle law firm asked me to work with Craigslist. I'd been focused on Internet law and cyber crime for clients like Microsoft (MSFT) and Amazon.com (AMZN), and I'd done work with victims of abuse. Craigslist was drafting new guidelines for its erotic services section. These ads may be distasteful, but services like stripping and phone sex are legal.

Craigslist had let people post these ads for free. It added a fee after pressure from the states attorneys general; payments make it easier to track predators. Then the attorneys general turned around and accused them of profiting from the exploitation of women and children. In 2010, I was sitting in our firm's office in San Francisco when [Craigslist] Chief Executive Officer Jim Buckmaster told me they were going to shut the section down. It was heartbreaking. I knew the content would just migrate.

Around that time, Backpage.com [the Village Voice Media-owned classified ad branch] had come out swinging to defend its ads. It was aggressive. When one of their board members reached out to me in February, I flew to their headquarters in Phoenix and met with Executive Editor Michael Lacey and CEO Jim Larkin. I was impressed with their commitment. These are family men. They want to stop the exploitation of children. We monitor these ads and do everything we can to help law enforcement trace traffickers.

Craigslist and Backpage are competitors. It was clear I'd have to leave [my firm] to work with them. They gave me their word that they are not going to back down on this. I quit and took them on as my only client. I don't enjoy the scrutiny. It's scary, and it can be very unpleasant. As long as we fight trafficking, I can live with people demonizing us.

Has the Internet increased the incidence of prostitution and trafficking? It wouldn't surprise me. There is a lot of public pressure to shut down the ads. I understand why people think there's a tipping point. With Craigslist, there was a tipping point. But that's not the culture of this company, or the personality of Jim or Michael or me.

If they shut down the adult category, I'll leave. Backpage is best positioned to fight this. If that happens and I quit, I don't know what I'll do. This is all-consuming for me. — *As told to Diane Brady*

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