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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

July 30, 2013

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The Honorable Eric H. Holder, Jr.
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
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Dear Attorney General Holder:

Many Americans were undoubtedly heartened to learn yesterday that authorities rescued 105 children from 76 different cities across this nation who had been forced into prostitution, and arrested 150 pimps who were intimately involved in the exploitation of these minors—children ranging in age from 13 to 17. But I suspect that just as many Americans were shocked to learn of the scope and reach of human trafficking in our own back yard. For under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act *any* minor used in a commercial sex act is a victim of human trafficking.

I applaud the impressive work of the FBI; its local, state, and federal law enforcement partners, including the Fairfax County Police Department and the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). As you know, I have long supported efforts locally and in the annual Commerce-Justice-Science (CJS) appropriations bill to elevate this issue as a law enforcement priority. In fact in the CJS bill which recently passed the House Appropriations Committee included language instructing U.S. Attorneys to maintain their human trafficking task forces and undertake proactive investigations of persons or entities facilitating trafficking in persons through the use of classified advertising on the Internet. The bill also directs the U.S. Attorney General to submit a comprehensive report on all DOJ anti-trafficking activities, including legislative proposals that may advance any efforts, no later than 60 days after the bill is signed into law.

While the details of this campaign, Operation Cross Country, are still emerging, not unsurprising, Backpage.com featured prominently in the announcement of the crackdown. In fact, a *CNN* story this morning cited the assistant director of the FBI's criminal investigative division, as saying, "This seventh iteration of Operation Cross Country also was the most successful, with a 30% to 40% increase in 'identifying both victims and pimps' compared with previous operations." The story continued, "He credited the success in part to an expansion of the probe to websites such as www backpage.com, which he called a forum 'where pimps and exploiters gather.'"

An *NBC* news story following the raid reported, "Search for 'Backpage.com' on the FBI's main website and up pops eight whole pages of press releases and public announcements

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naming the classified advertising site as a tool for sex criminals, particularly those selling children, sex and prostitution.” Case after case shows that as long as web sites like Backpage.com operate with impunity, impervious to public shame, law enforcement will simply be playing catch up.

In that vein, just last week, an overwhelming majority of state and territorial attorneys general sent a letter to the chair and ranking members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and House Committee on Energy and Commerce. The letter indicated that “Federal enforcement alone has proven insufficient to stem the growth of internet-facilitated child sex trafficking,” and pleaded that, “Those on the front lines of the battle against the sexual exploitation of children---state and local law enforcement---must be granted the authority to investigate and prosecute those who facilitate these horrible crimes.”

I couldn't agree more, which is why in April 2012, well over a year ago, I wrote you a letter making clear that classified Internet advertising was the latest front in the battle against sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors. Specifically I wrote, “...if DOJ is of the mind that there are insufficient laws on the books to prosecute this activity, I respectfully request a broader legal analysis and recommendations to Congress of legislative initiatives that may be undertaken to fully equip law enforcement to tackle this problem.” This was the first of several letters I've written on the topic.

On June 8 2012, I wrote, “...I continue to believe that unless there is the very real prospect of criminal liability that Backpage.com will fail to change...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 consequences. I welcome the best legal analysis the Department can provide in how to ensure that this happens.”

And again, on March 27, 2013 I wrote you, this time including a series of recommendations provided by NCMC that Backpage.com and similar Web sites used for trafficking could voluntarily adopt to reduce the sexual exploitation of children online. I urged you, as the nation's chief law enforcement officer, to press Backpage.com to immediately adopt these practices and said that if they fail to do so you should “...take legal action against Backpage.com.”

These last two letters have gone unanswered. The legal analysis has never been provided and the exploitation of innocents continues.

Human trafficking has rightly been deemed the slavery issue of our time. It isn't simply an international tragedy, it's a national and local outrage. For years, the back of my office door featured a giant picture of William Wilberforce—the remarkable abolitionist, and man of faith, who labored tirelessly for decades to ban the slave trade in the British Empire. Wilberforce was part of a broader transatlantic abolition movement dating back to the 1700s. He served as an inspiration for the abolitionist cause on our own shores, laying the foundation for the likes of

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Frederick Douglas, Harriet Beecher Stowe and even Abraham Lincoln, who 150 years ago this year issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Wilberforce, famously said, "Having heard all this, you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you do not know." We know that our nation's children are at risk of horrific exploitation that almost defies imagination. We know how pimps and johns use specific Web sites to profit from and prey on their vulnerability. Will you continue to look the other way?

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

THINK OF ALL THE WOMEN
AND CHILDREN THAT COULD BE
HELPED. YOU COULD MAKE A
DIFFERENCE IF YOU ACT.