



DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

News Release

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**ATTORNEYS GENERAL TO BACKPAGE.COM: PROVE YOU ARE FIGHTING
HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

HONOLULU – Attorney General David Louie and 45 other attorneys general today called for information about how Backpage.com presumably attempts to remove advertising for sex trafficking, especially ads that could involve minors.

In a letter to the online classified site's lawyers, the attorneys general say that Backpage.com claims it has strict policies to prevent illegal activity. Yet the chief legal officers of Washington state, Missouri and Connecticut have found hundreds of ads on Backpage.com's regional sites that are clearly for illegal services.

"It does not require forensic training to understand that these advertisements are for prostitution," the attorneys general wrote.

The letter says the hub for illegal sex ads is a magnet for those seeking to exploit minors and points to more than 50 cases, in 22 states over three years, involving the trafficking or attempted trafficking of minors through Backpage.com. "These are only the stories that made it into the news; many more instances likely exist," the attorneys general wrote. They also reminded Backpage.com of a 2010 request from nearly two dozen attorneys general asking that the adult services site be taken down.

"Backpage.com's adult service advertisements are a beacon for human traffickers and easy for them to exploit," Hawaii Attorney General David Louie said. "It is simply too easy for child sex trafficking to occur on Backpage.com's site. If it's going to be part of the solution, it must take down these advertisements and aggressively monitor the rest of its site."

In many cases involving human trafficking on Backpage.com, law enforcement finds that minors are, in fact, often coerced. Prosecutors in Benton County, Wash., are handling a case in which teen girls say they were threatened and extorted by two adults who marketed them on Backpage.com. One of the adults rented a hotel room and

forced the girls to have sex with men who answered the online ads. Backpage.com charges \$1 and up for such ads.

Backpage.com, owned by Village Voice Media, LLC, is the top provider of “adult services” advertisements. The multimedia company, which owns 13 weekly newspapers in the United States, admits its involvement in advertising illegal services. In a meeting with staff at the Washington State Attorney General’s Office, Village Voice board member Don Moon readily acknowledged prostitution ads appear on the Web site. And in a June 29 article published nationally by the Village Voice, the corporation criticized those concerned about child sex trafficking as “prohibitionists bent on ending the world’s oldest profession,” acknowledging that, as a seller of adults services ads, “Village Voice has a stake in this story.” Industry analysts suggest that Village Voice’s stake in adult services advertisements is worth about \$22.7 million in annual revenue.

Many state attorneys general believe that Backpage.com is attempting to minimize the impact of child sex trafficking because they fear it will turn attention to the company’s robust prostitution advertising business. While Backpage.com has ramped up its effort to screen some ads for minors, the attorneys general involved in today’s letter believe that “Backpage.com sets a minimal bar for content review in an effort to temper public condemnation, while ensuring that the revenue spigot provided by prostitution advertising remains intact.”

The letter from attorneys general makes a series of requests to Backpage.com, asking that the company willingly provide information in lieu of a subpoena. For example, in order to substantiate the claim that the company enforces policies to prevent illegal activity, the attorneys general ask Backpage.com to describe its understanding of what constitutes “illegal activity,” and whether advertisements for prostitution fall into that category. The attorneys general also ask how many advertisements in its adult section and subsections have been submitted since September 1, 2010, how many of those advertisements were individually screened, how many were rejected and how many were removed after being discovered to be for illegal services.

In 2008, 42 attorneys general reached an agreement with Craigslist to crack down on illegal listings, in an effort to reduce crimes like human trafficking. Craigslist ultimately removed its “erotic services” section altogether in May 2009. In September 2010, 21 attorneys general wrote Backpage.com to request that the adult services section be closed.

The states signing on to today’s letter are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wyoming and the territory of Guam.

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