



Written Testimony of Polaris Project – Hearing on Sexual Exploitation Online  
October 19, 2010  
10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

In response to a request from the Office of the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Polaris Project would like to provide the following written testimony to be entered into the record of the “Hearing on Sexual Exploitation Online,” held on October 19, 2010.

Polaris Project, founded in 2002, is a leading anti-trafficking organization in the United States. Polaris Project's comprehensive approach to combating human trafficking includes conducting direct outreach and victim identification, providing social services and transitional housing to victims, operating the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) serving as the central national hotline on human trafficking, advocating for stronger state and federal anti-trafficking legislation, and engaging community members in local and national grassroots efforts.

Much like the majority of other countries affected by human trafficking, the U.S. has a large internal or "domestic" component of human trafficking for the purposes of both sexual and labor exploitation. One of the largest forms of domestic sex trafficking in the U.S. involves traffickers who coerce women and children to enter the commercial sex industry through the use of a variety of recruitment and control mechanisms in strip clubs, street-based prostitution, escort services, brothels, and online. Domestic sex traffickers, commonly referred to as pimps, particularly target vulnerable youth, such as runaway and homeless youth, and reinforce the reality that the average age of entry into prostitution is 12-13 years old in the U.S. Experts estimate that at least 100,000 children are sexually exploited each year.

Over the course of the last several months, Polaris Project has been involved with a number of other organizations in a national effort to address the issue of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking online. Polaris Project coordinated a national non-governmental organization sign-on letter to Craigslist, which garnered the support of 104 signatories. As part of the effort, Polaris Project worked with other NGOs to complete a manual count of sex ads on Craigslist to get a sense of the volume of ads and track volume over time. The count revealed that on February 7, 2007, there were 16,174 individual Craigslist erotic ads on the U.S. pages and 480 posted on the site's Massachusetts pages. As of July 21, 2009, there were 12,834 individual adult services ads on Craigslist posted on the U.S. pages and 244 on the Massachusetts pages. This data demonstrates that the online recruitment, enticement, and provision of individuals for sex was alive and well, and while Craigslist announced its decision to shut down its adult services



section on September 3, 2010 much of the traffic has begun to migrate to other sites including Backpage.com and Eros.com.

On Monday, October 18, Backpage.com announced its intention to suspend certain areas of its personals and adult sections while it put safeguards in place to prevent the misuse of the site. Only five days earlier, the Kansas Attorney General had announced the arrest of two men for responding to an ad about sex with a 14-year old girl. While anti-trafficking organizations welcome Backpage's action, many are still concerned about its role in facilitating the illegal sex trade and sexual exploitation of women and children for sex. Some of the more egregious ads such as those on the Escorts Page under "Adult," and the Body Rubs page under "Adult," also advertise individuals at risk for sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Polaris Project would urge Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley to contact Backpage and other similar sites like Eros.com to encourage these companies to seriously confront the facilitation of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking online by closing all sections of their sites which serve to facilitate such exploitation unless proper safeguards can be put in place to effectively prevent it.

In addition to addressing the issue of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking online, Polaris Project commends the Massachusetts Attorney General for undertaking a comprehensive review of efforts to address human trafficking and public safety aspects around the illegal sex trade. Polaris Project urges the Massachusetts Attorney General to work closely with the non-governmental organizations, law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and other members of the criminal justice system, juvenile justice system, and child protection system committed to addressing human trafficking in all its forms. A great deal of work and progress is being made in Massachusetts to identify and serve victims and address the demand that drives the commercial sex industry where sex trafficking thrives by the Massachusetts Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force and many other organizations. As the next and critical step for the state to combat human trafficking in all its forms in Massachusetts, Polaris Project would urge the Massachusetts Legislature to pass the bill currently pending -- Senate, No. 2589 -- An Act Relating to Human Trafficking and Protection.

Submitted by

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