

Human trafficking should not be a business matter: Opinion

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By Valerie Vainieri Huttle

Human trafficking is happening right here in New Jersey and we must stop it. Just days ago we learned that an international trafficking ring has been operating brothels in Lakewood, subjecting women to horrific sexual exploitation and degradation.

This modern-day slavery is perpetuated by modern-day technology. The internet allows traffickers to sell children into sexual servitude with the click of a button. Traffickers are criminally liable for their postings and the websites that enable them must be as well.

New Jersey recently took bold action to combat trafficking when the Legislature unanimously passed and Gov. Chris Christie signed into law the Human Trafficking Prevention, Protection, and Treatment Act. A provision of the law makes it a first-degree crime to knowingly publish, disseminate or display an advertisement or photo promoting sex with a minor. A violation is punishable by a \$25,000 fine that would be used to support survivors of trafficking.

I sponsored the law to help victims become survivors and to give law enforcement the tools they need to prosecute traffickers and prevent future exploitation. This provision is one of those critical tools.

Citing the burdens of complying with the law, Backpage.com and Internet Archive were recently granted a temporary injunction to shield themselves and similar companies from liability when ads for sex with children are posted on their websites.

This lawsuit is motivated by profit. Backpage.com is the top provider of “adult services” advertisements, which is estimated to generate about \$22.7 million in annual revenue for the company.

How we address the child sex trade speaks volumes about our values and priorities.

In 2011, the National Association of Attorneys General called on Backpage.com to shut down its adult services section because of the blatant role it plays in the promotion of sex trafficking. Backpage.com refused.

Online publications claim to be cracking down on illegal advertisements of sex with minors, yet they continue to feature victims who are unable to consent to sex or protect themselves from predators.

Turning a blind eye and shrugging off any responsibility for the atrocities of child sex trafficking is

criminal and the law must treat it as such.

How we address the child sex trade speaks volumes about our values and priorities. Do we want to be known as a society that cares more about the financial burden of monitoring content than we do about child welfare? The cost of saving children from sexual, emotional and psychological trauma is a small price to pay.

The time for self-policing is over. New Jersey must be able to hold online publications accountable for the sex slavery of minors.

Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle (D-Bergen) represents the 37th Legislative District.

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