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Hotel chain boosting staff training to fight child prostitution

By **Michael Martinez**, CNN
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Wyndham Worldwide says it is expanding a years-long effort

It is working with groups that fight child prostitution and trafficking

The effort follows a police investigation and an Internet petition

Los Angeles (CNN) -- Hotel operator Wyndham Worldwide will improve its staff training and procedures after authorities cracked down on gang-led child prostitution rings in California hotels, a probe that drew media and activist attention to the chain, a hotel spokesman said Friday.

Wyndham is expanding its years-long efforts to fight child sex trafficking by reviewing its operating practices in partnership with the nonprofit ECPAT-USA (Ending Child Prostitution and Trafficking), said Michael Valentino, director of communications for Wyndham Worldwide.

Southern California authorities recently completed an 18-month investigation into allegations that three rival Crips gangs collaborated to prostitute girls and women out of California hotels through Internet-arranged meetings.

The investigation resulted in an April federal indictment of 38 people, including suspected gang members and the owners of a Wyndham-franchised Travelodge in Oceanside, authorities said. A CNN story in June prompted one activist to lead a 14,000-signature online petition drive on Change.org, an activist platform, demanding that Wyndham reform its business policies.

"As long as human trafficking and exploitation continue to be supported by those profiting from this tragic practice, we believe no member of the travel and tourism industry can ever guarantee these events will not occur in the future," Valentino told CNN in an e-mail Friday.

"However, our shared commitment and partnership with organizations like the Polaris Project and ECPAT help play a critical role in increasing awareness and prevention," he said.

The Polaris Project is a non-profit, non-governmental group combating human trafficking, and Wyndham has given hotel accommodations through the group to victims of human trafficking, Valentino said.

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based Wyndham has also become a member of the Code for the Protection of Children in Travel and Tourism, an industry initiative combating child sex abuse that's funded by UNICEF, Valentino said.

"We have also had human rights policies and training at our company for several years, and have been actively collaborating with ECPAT in reviewing and enhancing our training, policies, and procedures to best adhere to the intention and spirit of the code," Valentino said.

On Thursday, Change.org posted on its website the headline "Victory! Wyndham Signs Code of Conduct to Prevent Child Sex Trafficking" and recounted the online petition drive San Diego native Tim Rosner launched after reading the CNN article, which dealt with a child sex trafficking ring at a Wyndham property in his hometown.

"I'm thrilled to see Wyndham take this proactive step to fight child sex trafficking," Rosner told Change.org.

The petition asked Wyndham to join the child-protection code initiative and to commit to its six criteria for preventing child sex trafficking and child sex tourism at their hotels.

Valentino added that "it's important to note that in recent years, Wyndham Worldwide has worked with ECPAT, Polaris Project, and other organizations in our shared commitment to the safety of all children."

CNN's Traci Tamura and Thelma Gutierrez contributed to this report.

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