

For Immediate Release: July 17, 2015

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Visa and MasterCard Make Sex Workers, Trafficking Victims More Vulnerable, Jeopardize Anti-Trafficking Investigations

By cutting off access to online advertising, Visa and MasterCard put victims, investigations at risk

New York, NY – Following the decision by Visa and MasterCard to no longer process payment for adult advertising on Backpage.com, the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center denounced the decision as one that will not only put those in the sex trade, including trafficking victims, at risk, but also jeopardize on-going and future anti-trafficking investigations.

“Access to online advertising can be a basic safety mechanism for many people in the sex industry,” said **Crystal DeBoise, Director of the Sex Workers Project**. “The ability to advertise online gives sex workers the ability to screen clients, to negotiate for services and condoms use, and to have more control over the interactions and environment in a sex work exchange. These are all safety strategies people in the sex trade need to survive. Visa and MasterCard trying to end this avenue will only cause harm to those in the sex trade, and will not stop trafficking.”

In response to [Cook County Sherriff Tom Dart’s request](#), the two prominent credit card companies opted to no longer process payment for Backpage ads. As a result, people trying to advertise online were immediately and without warning deprived of this forum, meaning that many sex workers were left scrambling to figure out how to make ends meet. The platform was then only accessible to those able to access digital currencies like Bitcoin. Various sex worker support organizations immediately set up trainings for their members on digital currencies, but this technology can be challenging for those with limited internet access.

In a move which will mitigate some of the immediate harms, Backpage.com responded to the decision by temporarily making adult services ads free to post. Not charging for ads at least ensures that sex workers who most need a safe place to post services won’t face the harshest consequences.

“For those trying to pay their rent or feed their families, abruptly ending their access to income can be devastating,” noted **organizer and activist Kristen DiAngelo of the Sex Workers Outreach Project**. “Even more concerning, sex workers may be forced to work on the street where they are much more vulnerable to abusive pimps and traffickers, as well as other violence.” DiAngelo saw firsthand the [rise in street-based work](#) and increases in vulnerability after the closing of online advertiser MyRedBook last year.

Paradoxically, this move also has serious implications for anti-trafficking investigations, which utilize financial and credit card information obtained through Backpage when they suspect trafficking. In a [white paper released by Thomson Reuters Foundation CEO Monique Villa and Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance](#), Vance noted that, “[h]uman trafficking, at its core, is a business. Like other businesses, it leaves a financial paper trail that can be tracked and used to identify trafficking networks. With the help of banks and other financial institutions, my office has been able to secure convictions against traffickers without having to rely solely on the testimony of victims who often suffer emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. These institutions can flag suspicious activity and transactions that may assist in identifying a trafficker who otherwise would have gone undetected.” If central online forums like

Backpage no longer collect credit card information, law enforcement agencies that suspect trafficking will have fewer ways to locate traffickers and gather evidence.

“When we look at ending trafficking in the sex trade, we need to focus on the lives and needs of those being exploited, not make them more vulnerable. While cutting off ties in the name of anti-trafficking will get Visa and MasterCard some good press, it will ultimately do more harm than good for trafficking victims, investigations, and those who rely on the sex industry to meet their very basic economic needs,” concluded **DeBoise**.

ABOUT THE SEX WORKERS PROJECT: The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center provides client-centered legal and social services to individuals who engage in sex work, regardless of whether they do so by choice, circumstance, or coercion. One of the first programs in the nation to assist survivors of human trafficking, the Sex Workers Project has pioneered an approach to service grounded in human rights, harm reduction and in the real life experiences of our clients. Their professional service providers are multi-lingual, non-judgmental and bring more than ten years of experience.

As the only US organization meeting the needs of both sex workers and trafficking victims, the Sex Workers Project serves a marginalized community that few others reach. SWP engages in [policy](#) and [media advocacy](#), community education and [human rights documentation](#), working to create a world that is safe for sex workers and where human trafficking does not exist.

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