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Contact: Kate D'Adamo, 646-602-5689, kdadamo@urbanjustice.org

Sex Workers Project Respond to Arrest of Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer

New York, NY – In response to the recent arrest of Backpage.com CEO Carl Ferrer for charging money for ads posted in the “escort” section of the site, the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center released the following statement:

“We strongly condemn these efforts to stigmatize the sex industry and push sex workers into the shadows. This culmination of a three-year investigation by the California government is a shocking waste of resources for a political stunt that leaves sex workers and trafficking victims stigmatized, isolated, and more vulnerable to violence.

Human trafficking is a heinous crime. Anti-trafficking efforts must center resources on the most effective, evidence-based techniques. Survivors of human trafficking deserve fully-funded services in order to rebuild their lives. This investigation drained resources for three years, resources that could have been spent on investigating and prosecuting human trafficking. Targeting online platforms does not reduce trafficking into the sex trade, and the vulnerability to victimization created by these actions impacts trafficking victims just as much as those who are engaging in sex work of their own volition. Effective anti-trafficking work addresses root causes like poverty and criminalization, and targets traffickers, instead of sex workers’ support systems.

Furthermore, victims of human trafficking in other labor sectors in California, in agriculture and factories for example, remain undiscovered and underserved because all attention is diverted to misguided attempts to close sites where sex workers advertise. As anti-trafficking service providers, it is unconscionable to think of how many victims went without the proper attention from law enforcement and sought out under-funded services during these three years.

Targeting internet-based advertisers also has dire consequences for those trading sex. Actions like this have a chilling effect on anyone working with the sex trade, leaving sex workers more isolated and vulnerable to harm. The closure of advertising sites MyRedbook in 2014 and Rentboy in 2015 created dire instability for those who rely on these sites to make ends meet. Lacking the ability to work online means some sex workers move to street-based work, where people are more likely to face violence, [as happened in California after the closure of MyRedBook](#). We commend Backpage’s commitment to its advertisers to stay open, knowing the importance it has to the safety and well-being of those who use its services.

Online advertising provides a level of safety to those in the sex industry that many other spaces do not. Screening clients for potential violence means that workers endure less abuse and enjoy more autonomy. The ability to negotiate services, including condom use, mean that workers are more in control of their lives and well-being, and may not be as dependent on brothels or managers. Access to



online advertising makes sex work more safe and secure for everyone involved, sex workers and trafficking victims alike.

It is shameful that California, and specifically Attorney General Kamala Harris, would so callously threaten the lives and wellbeing of sex workers and waste precious resources for little more than a political stunt.”

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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