

For Immediate Release – April 10, 2018

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Sex Workers Project Statement on Backpage.com Seizure

New York, NY – The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center (UJC) is deeply concerned about the shutdown and seizure of Backpage.com by the FBI.

Online advertising platforms play a crucial role in keeping sex workers safer through the sharing of information with other workers about violent, harassing or disrespectful clients; proactive communication with potential clients about boundaries, sexual health, and compensation for time spent; and other harm reduction and safety planning strategies.

The Sex Workers Project is particularly concerned about this seizure of an important platform for workers at a time when the U.S. Congress has recently passed FOSTA/SESTA, legislation that makes workers less safe, silences free speech, creates criminal and civil liabilities for third-party speech, exacerbates criminalization of workers, and makes individuals more vulnerable to human trafficking.

SESTA/FOSTA is self-defeating because sex workers and human trafficking survivors are not mutually exclusive or divisible populations. Our experience providing legal and social services to both human trafficking survivors and sex workers supports the undeniable fact that that individuals can, and often do, have experience as both trafficking survivors and as sex workers by choice and/or circumstance. It is deeply misguided for anti-trafficking advocates to suppose that any legislation or actions endangering sex workers would not also endanger trafficking survivors and make them vulnerable to re-trafficking. Shutting down online platforms that facilitate safer working conditions for workers has devastating public health consequences and exposes workers to greater risk of interpersonal violence with potential clients and state violence at the hands of police.

The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center opposes censorship, intimidation and criminalization of online platforms and services that help sex workers support ourselves and our families while helping us to protect our health, safety and wellness. We know that sex work is work involving the consensual labor of adults and should not be criminalized in any jurisdiction. We know that sex workers are human beings of every race, gender, religion, class and background, with inalienable human rights; and that all workers are deserving of labor protections. We are clear about the difference and problematic conflation of sex work and human trafficking, and emphasize that sex work is work engaged in by choice and/or circumstance like all other work, while human trafficking requires force, fraud or coercion.

Shutting down Backpage.com and similar sites will not end human trafficking but will make sex workers more vulnerable and push them further to the margins. Promoting and protecting the human rights of sex workers advances the goal of ending human trafficking.

We eagerly await further information about this case as we continue to engage in safety planning and harm reduction techniques with our clients; conduct human rights education among the media, the public, and policy makers; support community organizing; and consider litigation strategies to combat the damage of FOSTA/SESTA.

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