

The Register-Guard

OPINION HOME

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Wyden blocks bill to stop online sex trafficking

BY REBECCA BENDER

For The Register-Guard

NOV. 29, 2017

Sex trafficking is talked about everywhere right now. Most of the time we never see it — so it must not be happening here in Oregon, right?

Wrong. With the advent of the Internet, traffickers and pimps have moved off the streets and are selling their “product” — mostly young girls — online.

Shocking, I know. But these children are just a click away. You can go right now on the regular Web (not the Dark Web) and order a human for sex to be at your door within 15 minutes. It happens in every town and city across Oregon in numbers that would make your head spin.

It's horrific, but we can no longer pretend it's not happening. We need to collectively wake up so that we can better protect our children.

How, exactly, are companies getting away with creating these awful websites where people are bought and sold without any penalty? Well, it's called the Communication Decency Act, specifically Section 230, also referred to as the CDA230. This law was passed back in 1996 before the Internet was anything like it is today, to protect companies from being liable for third-party postings.

Which made total sense. It wouldn't be right for me to get into trouble because some weirdo tried to sell drugs on the comments section of my blog. Nor do any of us want Facebook or Google to get in trouble for stupid postings people make every hour of every day.

But a lot has changed in the last 20-plus years. There are websites that make hundreds of millions of dollars a year facilitating sex trafficking (and other illegal activity), and our laws haven't caught up with them.

Recently, several sexually exploited children filed suit against one of these websites, Backpage, but their case was dismissed. The court stated that even if Backpage were engaged in the crime of trafficking, it was nonetheless protected by CDA320. The court advised survivors to seek a legislative solution. (Learn more in the Netflix documentary, “I Am Jane Doe.”)

So a group of lawyers, survivors and activists got together with members of Congress and created an amendment to the CDA230 that would still protect all of our freedom and privacy, while targeting only the bad actors who are purposely creating companies and websites for illegal activity — especially when it comes to harming children.

This narrow, surgical amendment to the CDA230 was titled SESTA: The Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act of 2017. Companies that are criminally involved with sex trafficking should be prosecuted at the state and federal level. Companies that engage in this type of criminal

conduct should also have to answer to civil claims. Forty-eight senators have signed on to this bill because it makes sense to amend such an outdated law.

Sen. Ron Wyden, however, is not supporting the bill — and he actually demanded a hold on this critical legislation, citing privacy and censorship concerns. Having met with Wyden's staff on the need for victims to access justice, I am disappointed by his announcement. Wyden is alone in blocking this critical bipartisan legislation from being voted on by the full Senate — legislation that was unanimously passed by the Senate Commerce Committee two weeks ago.

Survivors of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation know the deep and profound harm caused by sex trafficking. We lead organizations that provide services and advocacy for exploited individuals, and continue to see the irreparable harm caused by online sex trafficking.

It is time to hold these websites accountable for the harm that they cause — after all, we wouldn't allow someone to sell a child for sex on the street corner, so why are criminals able to do this online and hide behind the CDA?

SESTA is needed to help disrupt the purchase of sex online with children and trafficked persons. Every day, thousands of women and children are marketed and purchased online with ease and impunity. It is as easy to order sex with children and exploited adults as it is to order a pizza. SESTA would eliminate this judicial loophole so that companies like Backpage can no longer operate with impunity.

Oregonians, we need you to take a stand! Please write in, call, email Wyden and demand he support SESTA. Stand with us to provide victims of online sex trafficking with a pathway to justice.

He hasn't listened to survivors and activists, but he will listen to you. Go to www.wyden.senate.gov/contact to demand Senator Wyden sign on to SESTA. Read more about the bill at www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1693.

Rebecca Bender, CEO and founder of the Rebecca Bender Initiative, is the author of "Roadmap to Redemption." She serves as co-chair of the Oregon Department of Justice's Human Trafficking Advisory Council and is a survivor of human trafficking after being lured off the University of Oregon campus.

More [GUEST VIEWPOINT](#) articles »