

Under the online heading, “Just Like ~Candy~ - 19,” would-be johns, (or “Upscale Gentlemen” as the escort ad suggests) are promised a female who is “Eager ~N~Willing To Plea**E.”

The “PIC Are [sic] Real” the ad proclaims, but please “NO PRIVATE CALLS OR TEXT!!!” and of course “DONATOINS [sic] ARE APPRECIATED.”

On the right side of the webpage are three photos depicting what appears to be a young woman, brunette, barely clothed and awash in yellow incandescent motel-room light. In two shots, her obscured face peers over her left shoulder as her body turns away from the photographer in a suggestive pose.

Over her right shoulder, the motel door is visible, with the required postings including a diagram of the fire escape plan. In the last shot, she stretches out on a dingy-looking floral bedspread, back arched, face cropped out of the photo.

The ad for “Candy” suggests she’s 19. But another nearly identical ad — posted recently on consecutive Saturdays in the “Nashville escorts” section of backpage.com — shows the same three photos plus another and claims this “Beautiful~ Princess~” is 20 years old.

None of her customers really knows Candy’s true age. They might not know that she may be doing what she does because someone else forces her to. They might not even care.

Ads like the one described are the new user-friendly interface for the world’s oldest profession. But they’re also the promotional tool of choice for those who ensnare others — mostly females, some over 18, some just kids — and force them into the prostitution “game,” driving them state to state, city to city, hotel to motel, pimping them out using threats or promises while profiting off their degradation.

Human sex trafficking isn’t restricted to foreign countries. Some people estimate it’s one of the fastest-growing crimes in the world, though it’s hard to pin statistics on it due to the underground nature of the crime. One thing is certain, especially in Tennessee: Eyes are opening up to the crime — how to recognize it, and how to respond to it.

Last year, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation released the report, “Tennessee Human Sex Trafficking Study: The Impact on Children and Youth 2011,” a study conducted in conjunction with Vanderbilt Center for Community Studies.

In his introduction to the report, TBI director Mark Gwyn said it “shines a spotlight on a disturbing crime trend that little is known about and is rarely publicized.”

Wrapping up his intro, Gwyn said prosecutors need “more serious consequences” to wield against sex-trafficking offenders. And victims should be allowed to sue those who subject them to such crimes, under civil laws for damages, he added.

The Project Innocence Initiative has identified four primary policy issues to be addressed to combat domestic sex trafficking of minors: eliminating demand; prosecuting traffickers; identifying victims; and providing victims with protection, services and shelter.

Derri Smith, executive director of End Slavery Tennessee, is one of those focused on training, aid and prevention involving human trafficking.

Through her organization, Smith trains professionals — juvenile judges, law enforcement officials, medical

professionals, social workers — on how to recognize trafficking victims. In teaching prevention, Smith enlightens young people on the common lures of sex traffickers such as “boyfriending” or “girlfriending” — romancing or befriending someone with promises of great things, only to entrap them into the “game.”

When it comes to aid, there are “many, many complex, holistic after-care needs” that police don’t have the funds or power to provide, Smith said. Those can include shelter, transportation, household needs, food, clothing and medical exams, or even something less obvious, such as removing a branding tattoo placed on a victim by a trafficker.

The problems are “huge” for law enforcement faced with policing and prosecuting sex-trafficking cases, Smith said, and while she applauds the “phenomenal” efforts of local authorities working such cases here, “They’re under-resourced. There aren’t enough people specialized and trained.”

“The victims of trafficking are not forthcoming in the beginning, because they’re scared. They’re under a lot of control and a lot of fear, so a lot of times it takes several interviews with the police before they’ll come forth.”


ANTOINETTE WELCH
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Smith added, "Judges, jury, the public — everybody needs to be educated when they're working on cases like this."

Today, Tennessee is actually in better shape than most states. "I think it was three years ago, we had three out of 10 basic laws that we needed in place [to fight trafficking]," Smith said. "We've gone up to seven as of this year." It's all still new, however, and a learning curve exists.

Vivonne Williams, executive director of the Trafficking in America Task Force, said part of the solution to the problem of sex trafficking lies in fighting the demand heightened by the prevalence of sexual content in pop culture.

Williams described the trafficking cycle as a triangle, connecting the victim to the trafficker to the john — the john being the point of the triangle where the demand is.

"Our focus is on the demand side, because we believe if we can stop the demand, then we can stop the problem. It's a supply and demand issue, like any other business," Williams said.

But with ads, movies, TV, you name it, soaked in sex, how do you combat demand? The problem is "huge, it's huge," Williams said, and the challenge includes finding ways to educate people, presumably starting with johns — about the effects of viewing pornography, and how a person can be compelled toward more and more viewing until viewing leads to action.

The more immediate step, however, may only be raising awareness, something Williams hopes to do next week during this year's Trafficking in America Conference. Coinciding with May being designated "Human Trafficking Awareness" month by state officials, the conference is scheduled for May 24-26 at the Holiday Opryland, bringing together speakers from across the country who work to eradicate trafficking in both sex and labor.

Asheville, with its central location as a crossroads of interstate traffic, finds itself firmly entrenched on the trafficking circuit, which links it to nearby cities like Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, Clarksville and Birmingham, Ala.

In August, police charged Prontiss Houseworth, who turned 19 this January, with trafficking sexual servitude after a detective answered an Backpage.com ad for "a girl special."

At the Knights End motel on Spring Street, police said they found two women who told detectives that Houseworth had taken them from Atlanta and driven them to Nashville, where the safety locks on the car doors engaged so they couldn't leave. They said Houseworth told them he was their pimp, they were in his "game," and threatened to use violence against them or their families if they didn't do as he said.

A grand jury indicted Houseworth in December on two counts of aggravated kidnapping, two counts of trafficking in sexual servitude and one count of weapon possession. Another woman, Ashley Harry, now 24, was also indicted along with Houseworth for her alleged role in the case. Police said Harry initially portrayed herself as a victim but they determined that she was involved in the criminal plot.

Smith, who worked closely with the victims, said the case involved a "girlfriending" scenario, in which Harry acted as a recruiter by befriending the women to lure them into the alleged sex-trafficking scheme.

Harry was charged in the indictment with three counts of aggravated kidnapping and two counts of trafficking for sexual servitude. The case is still pending.



Antoinette Welch, an assistant district attorney in Davidson County

them how they are, if they need anything. A response is a curt "f--- off," sometimes it's a "now" followed up by a call back later, or she just break down emotionally, thankful for the encounter.

The outreach operation, Fitchpatrick said, was available that night for any girls they reached the game. At the end of the night, she gleaned from conversations with law enforcement in that particular area.

According to her count from December 2011, volunteers contacted 1,000 females, resulting in four thousand and 30 referrals made.

As for law enforcement, Welch said, "They've been seeing these cases but just not identifying them properly."

Though some consenting line classified ads like "Candy" exploit the so-magical connection, the element lined with the hastily constructed prostitutes and pimps.

In recent years the proliferation of their use for promoting prostitution has growing evidence that they support trafficking have led to organizations to shut down or at least censor the advertisements of ad sites.

Just last week, the U.S. House of Representatives addressed a letter to Village Voice Media, urging the use of Backpage.com for trafficking by requiring in-person verification of prospective escort advertiser's ID, proof of identity and age for anyone using the site.

Backpage.com, owned by the latest purveyor of classified advertising, a business it inherited after the free classified giant Craigslist in the fall 2010 under pressure from general from across the country.

Antoinette Welch, an assistant attorney in Davidson County, said that sex trafficking much easier because of the Internet's anonymity.

"As far as the Internet goes," Welch said, "it's ten times more prevalent. It's not just Backpage or there are sites that have popped up all over the place."

Still, shutting down a single website, or a site — Backpage has hundreds of other listings — won't solve the problem, just like pushing off one corner won't stop drugs from reaching the street.

Welch said that while local law enforcement on sex trafficking has certainly risen over the past few years, "it's hard to say" exactly how the numbers of cases have trended in Tennessee, because before last year's TBI study, those numbers weren't tracked.

On top of that, a lot of the cases involving sex trafficking have been taken over by the federal government, especially in cases where the victims have been taken across state lines, such as in the Somali sex-trafficking trial that ended in Nashville two weeks ago.

Often, victims don't realize they're being exploited at first, according to Emily Fitchpatrick. She created the Asheville, N.C., nonprofit organization "On Eagles Wings Ministries," which operates the "Hope House" shelter programs aimed at restoring the lives of domestic victims of sex trafficking, ages 12-25. The shelters are long-term options for victims across the country, who are usually referred by law enforcement or juvenile detention centers. It's a model she hopes to spread nationally.

Fitchpatrick's organization operates a call center out of Asheville where trained volunteers reach out to those who post ads online by calling the "for a good time" numbers directly, and seeing if they can reach any girls who want help.

The call operations usually happen twice a month in different cities, sometimes organized around large sporting events that could attract those looking to buy and sell sex.

Volunteers explain to the girls the purpose of the call, ask

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it, "Technically, they cannot legally consent to have sex."

Detective Matthew Dixon said education is bringing the issue more to light for both police departments and the nonprofits that provide services for victims.

In 2005, Dixon started seeing the Internet used more and more for prostitution and, therefore, likely trafficking as well. On top of that, the ailing economy might have led more people — willingly or otherwise — into the commercial sex business.

The MNPD's "proactive approach" involves vice unit detectives calling up the numbers listed in on-line escort ads and seeing what they find at the other end of the line.

"Sometimes even when you get there, you don't know until after you interview and then investigate a little bit that it is human trafficking," Dixon said.

Around noon on the Friday that the verdict in the federal case came down, 17-year-old Mary sat in a Davidson County General Sessions courtroom testifying about how she came to Nashville to work as a prostitute for Marcus Owens. ("Mary" is a fictitious name used to protect the identity of a minor.)

Mary sat on the witness stand in a state-issued orange jumpsuit, her black hair pulled into a large, loose braid that rested on her left shoulder. Straight bangs covered her forehead. Her answers to attorneys' questions at times rang chippy, tinged with teenage contrariness, yet intelligent.

Under oath, she told the court about meeting Owens, 33, a month earlier in an Atlanta hotel, where she said her "crack head" mother essentially traded her for a drug debt. She said she left with Owens because her mother asked her to, because Mary been a prostitute since she became a teenager. Because she knew her role as a prostitute versus his as a pimp. Because "I felt obligated to," she said.

At one point in her testimony, prompted by the assistant district attorney, Mary pulled back her bangs to show the judge a discoloration on her forehead, where she said Owens struck her with a crowbar for not performing a sex act. A mark on her neck, she said, was where he burned her with a cigarette after she tried to run away, asking her, "Are you playing with my pimping?"

"My role," she told the court, "is basically do as I'm told."

Mary testified of how she traveled with Owens from Atlanta to Chattanooga, then on to Nashville, staying in various hotels for a few days, posting online ads and turning tricks. In Nashville, she said, they stopped at the Red Roof Inn on Donelson Pike on April 21 and then moved on to the Extended Stay America on Elm Hill Pike for the next few days, allegedly doing cocaine, shooting heroin and having sex with each other along the way.

She said Owens came up with the wording for the ads posted to Backpage.com, which read in part "last day in Nashville" and "specials all day." The ads included photos of her in which she apparently was shown depicting masturbation and partially exposing herself. Owens allegedly is the one who posted those images on the Internet for the ad.

The ads featuring Mary all included different ages — 19, 18, 22 — and when vice detectives responded to the ad and arrested the two on April 24, she told them she was 18. She said she lied because she assumed she and Owens would be out of jail and gone before authorities figured out she was 17.

After determining her correct age, however, police dropped the prostitution and simple possession charges against her. Owens now faces charges of promoting prostitution, trafficking for sexual servitude, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, aggravated sexual exploitation of a minor and aggravated statutory rape.

Depending on her testimony, additional charges may be added by the grand jury, where Owens' charges have been bound over. As for Mary, there's a small hope she may break the cycle she's in — following her appearance, she was placed in a free residential program that provides counseling and a place to stay for women who have been involved in destructive behavior. **EP**

Disclosure: Backpage.com has signed marketing agreements with a number of alternative weeklies around the U.S., including the *Nashville Scene*. The *Scene* and *The City Paper* are owned by SouthComm.

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DETECTIVE MATTHEW DIXON