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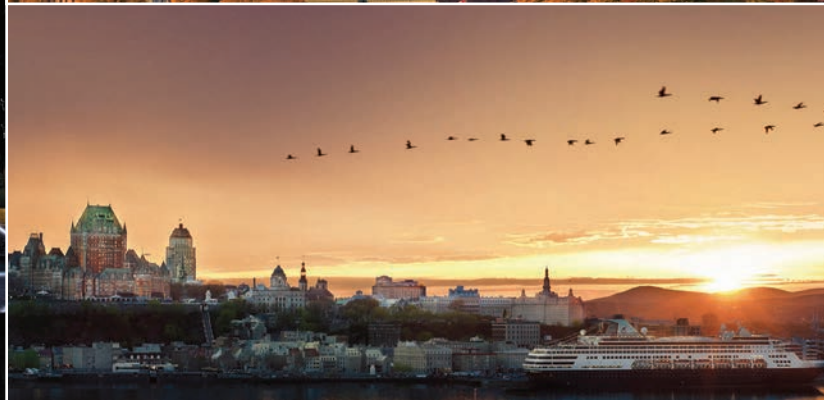
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Fighting Human Trafficking In A Digitally Transformed World

By **ROB MCKENNA**, Former Washington State Attorney General and President of the National Association of Attorneys General



Right now, in metropolitan areas across the country, law enforcement agencies are deploying simple-to-use technology to gather live information on human traffickers and on those who buy sex from trafficking victims. In a recent operation, a vice detective went from a software training in the morning, to placing a decoy chatbot ad at lunch, to placing a violent trafficker of children in custody before dinner. Simultaneously, social service providers are connecting with thousands of potential trafficking victims through cloud-based text messaging platforms. The future of anti-human trafficking is here.

Stories coming out of the multi-county anti-trafficking operations in Florida give us a snapshot of the scale and severity of what victims are experiencing, and the scale of the crime can seem overwhelming. But when I consider the technology tools that are available to law enforcement to fight human trafficking today, I am in awe of the unprecedented progress we've made in just a few short years. In Washington State, I've had a front row seat as several technology innovations developed by Seattle Against Slavery (SAS) and their team of Microsoft volunteers have helped provide needed data, spur arrests, and give victims pathways to escape their exploitation. More recently, I've seen these innovations come together into a holistic supply-and-demand disruption package called Freedom Signal (www.FreedomSignal.org).

Eight years ago, as Washington State Attorney General and president of the National Association of Attorney Generals (NAAG), my colleagues and I launched a program called "Pillars of Hope" aimed at disrupting human trafficking across the country. Human trafficking became a critical focus of NAAG training and coordination and is still an area of importance today. During the initial Pillars of Hope conference, we explored how modern traffickers followed the trends of other commercial enterprises, using the internet and mobile technology to facilitate the victimization of minors and adults. Data was scarce, but story after story emerged of survivors and their families who had witnessed the exploitation of trafficking victims, sometimes for years, as they were sold to countless buyers through online classified ads.

Seven years ago, my office fought Backpage.com in court on behalf of victims in states like mine, and online advertisements for sex with a potential trafficking victim were found to be protected under Section 230 of the federal Communications Decency Act. The online 'shopping' convenience of sites like Backpage resulted in massive increases in demand for commercial sex. This meant that the supply of victims being prostituted has been increased to meet that demand, and this growth aligns to the increase in trafficking victims that we see in sex trafficking statistics across the country.

Against this dire backdrop, the anti-trafficking movement persisted wherever possible. Federal, state, and local law enforcement shared strategies for targeting individual

"How do you expect to uproot a tree when all you are doing is ripping at the leaves?"

— Rachel Moran, human trafficking survivor, speaker, and author

traffickers, which grew into prosecutions of trafficking networks. Social service providers pushed for broader support for trafficking victims, and for the first time, trafficking survivors in many states had the trauma-informed care they needed. Awareness efforts evolved into lifting up survivor voices, and these survivors helped develop strategies for the complex and nuanced areas of law that were emerging around human trafficking investigations. Even as traffickers were being arrested and survivors began to receive support, we still saw a steady influx of exploited children and adults into the sex trade.

In Washington State in late 2015, organizations like Seattle Against Slavery began a new approach to fight sex trafficking. They formed a coalition and started working directly with volunteers from the technology community to find solutions that could meet the scale of exploitation we were seeing in our cities and counties. Experts from companies like

Microsoft stepped forward, and tools emerged to not only identify victims and connect them with services, but also to disrupt the source of funding for sex trafficking and much of its violence: buyers of commercial sex. As trafficking survivor and author Rachel Moran put it when asked about strategies that did not arrest sex buyers but only traffickers or those in prostitution, “How do you expect to uproot a tree when all you are doing is ripping at the leaves?”

The team brought in survivors, law enforcement, service providers like Real Escape from the Sex Trade (REST) and industry experts to participate in beta testing and “hackathons.” The tools they developed were packaged into a holistic suite and launched as Freedom Signal, and the initial results have been remarkable.

Victim outreach campaigns, in partnership with community advocates, have used text messages to connect over 1,200 potential trafficking victims with local support services. Using search engine ads, over 2 million attempts to buy sex online have instead received public service announcements highlighting the harm and consequences of human trafficking. Social media ads were tested for their effectiveness and the resulting messages have been shown to over 3 million potential sex buyers using advanced targeting algorithms.

Software chat bots, posing as trafficking victims in online classified ads, have disrupted nearly 17,000 attempts to buy trafficked sex and have gathered critical information about the buyers. Data analytics have finally given us the ability to track the impact of these efforts, and online searches for commercial sex keywords have decreased by over 50% in

targeted areas. For the first time, we have tools that can meet the scale of the problem, and the data to show that they work. Cloud-computing efficiencies can now make this technology available to municipalities for a fraction of the cost of a single trafficking sting operation.

In April 2018, the CEO and board members of Backpage.com were arrested, the site and its affiliates were shut down, and the company pled guilty to multiple counts including felony human trafficking. Weeks later, years of federal legislative effort came to fruition as the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA/SESTA) was signed into law, barring U.S.-based websites from knowingly profiting from human trafficking or prostitution. The online sex ecosystem saw a dramatic decrease in traffic following the Backpage.com shutdown, but it was temporary. Within months, a fragmented landscape of Backpage copycat sites emerged, many having moved their operations overseas. In response to this fragmentation, services like Freedom Signal have had to expand their efforts to index and catalogue a much wider range of sites nationally.

Even still, I remain hopeful. I see the power and adaptability of technologies like Freedom Signal combining with the experience and commitment of law enforcement agencies around the country. I believe a new era of the anti-trafficking movement is emerging. Each day, technology brings us one step closer to addressing one of the most tragic and heartbreaking injustices of our time. The day may now be here when sex trafficking in the United States can finally become what it deserves to be: a thing of the past.

