

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 19, 2012

Clergy Coalition Launches Campaign to Educate Village Voice Media's Top 50 Advertisers about Sex Ads of Minors on Backpage.com

Following Similar Effort by Four U.S. Senators, Auburn Seminary President Invites National Brands Advertising in Village Voice Media Publications to Help Combat Child Sex Trafficking

New York, NY — A coalition of clergy launched a campaign this week to educate the top 50 advertisers in Village Voice Media (VVM) publications about the sex trafficking controversy surrounding VVM's classifieds Web site Backpage.com. This advertiser education campaign is being organized by Groundswell, the social action initiative of Auburn Seminary and convener of a coalition of over 600 clergy calling for Backpage.com's Adult section to be closed. Yesterday, a group of U.S. Senators announced a similar effort in which they contacted advertisers of Village Voice Media, citing the same concerns as the clergy.

In an electronic communication to the companies on April 18, Auburn Seminary President Rev. Dr. Katharine Henderson asked these advertisers to examine their relationships with VVM publications while Backpage.com provides an Adult section of its Web site where underage children and teens have been sold for sex through ads placed by others. She wrote: "I urge you to consider your ongoing relationship with publications owned by Village Voice Media and to work with us to encourage the company to shut down the adult section of its Web site until it can be certain that no children or teens will be exploited through the section."

On April 12, U.S. Senators Mark Kirk (R-IL), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Marco Rubio (R-FL), and John Cornyn (R-TX) contacted numerous organizations advertising in Village Voice Media publications to inform them that VVM's Backpage.com has been linked to dozens of child sex trafficking cases. The Senators stated, "We are writing to strongly encourage you, as well as other leaders of major employers, charitable organizations, and public, educational and cultural institutions that advertise on Village Voice publications, to use your economic influence to end the online child sex trafficking facilitated by a Village Voice Media subsidiary, Backpage.com."

Village Voice Media's top 50 advertisers to whom Groundswell reached out span a wide range of industries, and include retail; restaurant/food/drink; sports; cinema; entertainment/art; telecom; travel; banking; and social media/TV/radio. Combined, the companies have advertised in all 13 of Village Voice Media's weekly publications, which are

located in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Texas, and Washington.

“Businesses advertising in Village Voice Media publications must be informed of the controversy surrounding the sex ads of minors on Backpage.com. Once these companies become aware of all the facts, we are confident they will join us in encouraging Village Voice Media to take the morally right step and shut down the Adult section of Backpage.com,” Rev. Dr. Henderson said.

After learning of the controversy over Backpage.com’s sex ads, seven advertisers and other affiliated businesses have expressed their displeasure to Village Voice Media, decided to stop advertising in Village Voice Media publications, or stated that they do not have future plans to advertise in Village Voice Media publications. These advertisers are AT&T, Live Nation, MillerCoors, Crown Imports LLC, TRIBECA Performing Arts Center, NYC Film Forum, and High Times.

Backpage.com came under intense scrutiny following an August 2011 letter to the company by the National Association of Attorneys General, which stated that it has “tracked more than 50 instances, in 22 states over three years, of charges filed against those trafficking or attempting to traffic minors on Backpage.com” and that “many more instances likely exist.” This coalition of 51 of the nation’s attorneys general called on VVM to shut down the Adult section of its Web site.

Groundswell made its first public appeal to VVM to take action and close Backpage.com’s Adult section in October 2011, when it published an open letter to VVM in a full-page ad in *The New York Times*. It also launched at that time a petition on Change.org, which to date has gathered over 225,000 signatures. Last month, Groundswell organized a rally outside the office of Village Voice Media flagship publication *The Village Voice* in New York City to deliver the petition signatures.

Today, [19 U.S. Senators](#), over 600 faith leaders, [53 leading anti-trafficking experts and organizations](#), state and city lawmakers around the country, and more than [225,000 individuals](#) have added their voices to the attorneys general’s and appealed to VVM to shut down the Adult section of Backpage.com, which services nearly 400 markets.

In the last several weeks, as the sex trafficking controversy surrounding Backpage.com has heated up and gained more public attention, at least two firms with investments in the privately-held Village Voice Media -- Goldman Sachs and Trimaran Capital – reportedly have agreed to sell their shares back to the company. Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) sent a letter to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder calling for the Obama administration to pursue possible criminal prosecution of Backpage.com

NOTE:

Village Voice Media does not agree with Groundswell’s view that Backpage.com’s Adult section should be shut down. Here’s a statement they provided to Nicholas Kristof in

January 2012 explaining their position: <http://media.villagevoicemedia.com/Backpage-statement-to-nicholas-kristof.7585803.0.pdf>

LINKS:

Information on Groundswell's advertiser education initiative:

<http://groundswell-movement.org/groundswells-public-education-effort>

Letter from four U.S. Senators to VillageVoice Media's

advertisers: http://www.kirk.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=476

Live signature totals from Groundswell's petition on Change.org:

<http://www.change.org/petitions/tell-village-voice-media-to-stop-child-sex-trafficking-on-backpagecom>

COMPLETE LIST OF COMPANIES CONTACTED BY GROUNDSWELL:

American Apparel
Android
Anheuser-Busch
Arizona Diamondbacks
ASPCA
AT&T
Atlantic Broadband
Barnes & Noble
BestBuy
Blick Art Materials
Buffalo Wild Wings
Champs Sports
Charter Communications
Cirque du Soleil
Colorado Mammoth Lacrosse
Dave and Busters
Foursquare
Guitar Center
H.D. Buttercup
H&M
Hard Rock Café
Harrah's Resorts
Houston Symphony
Icelandair
IHOP
IKEA
JR Electronics
KCRW
LG

Lululemon
Macy's
Mesa Arts Center
MetroPCS
Miami Dolphins
Miller Light
Minnesota Orchestra
Minnesota Wild
Monsanto
MTV2
REI
Reliant Bank
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Seattle Art Museum
St. Louis Rams
Starbucks
T-Mobile
Ticketfly
Total Bank
US Bank
Veo optics
Walt Disney Pictures
Waner Brothers
YWCA of Minneapolis
YWCA Twin Cities
Zagat