



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Heitkamp Encourages North Dakota Fire Departments to Apply for Federal Grant Funding**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** - U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp, a member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, encourages fire departments and volunteer organizations to begin applying today for federal funding to help increase the number of trained firefighters in North Dakota communities.

"To keep North Dakota's communities strong and safe, we must have fire departments that are properly staffed, trained, and prepared to respond to potential emergencies," said Heitkamp. "Our firefighters put their lives on the line each time they rush towards emergencies and we must do our part to make sure that they have the proper training and personnel needed to protect communities and come home safely each night. This federal grant opportunity that opens for application today will help fire departments recruit, hire and retain fire department staffing and I encourage all those eligible to apply."

This federal funding is available through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program, operated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The program enables fire departments to recruit and retain volunteer and career firefighters so that our community fire departments are properly staffed to respond to emergencies. In 2016, North Dakota received over \$3.2 million through the SAFER grant program that went to the [North Dakota Fire Fighter's Association](#) and [Turtle Mountain Community Fire Department](#).

Eligible fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations are encouraged to apply for these funds by February 10, 2017 by 5:00 p.m. ET. Information on the SAFER grant program can be found by going to [Grants.gov](#) and [FEMA's website](#).

Heitkamp has long been an advocate for North Dakota's firefighters. Heitkamp released her [Strong & Safe Communities Report](#) that has made our firefighters and first responders a pillar of her efforts to help North Dakota communities meet the opportunities that allow our state to



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## **Heitkamp: Senate Homeland Security Investigation Finds Backpage Knowingly Facilitated Online Sex Trafficking**

*Report and Hearing Follow Heitkamp's Work to Take CEO Carl Ferrer to Task in the U.S. Senate – Following the Release of the Report, Backpage.com Shut Down Adult Sections of Its Website in the U.S. Effective Immediately*

*\*\*Click here for [video](#), [audio](#) of Heitkamp at the first panel of today's hearing\*\**

*\*\*Click here for [video](#), [audio](#) of Heitkamp at the second panel of today's hearing\*\**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp challenged leadership of Backpage for its role in the facilitation of human trafficking on its site, a role which was confirmed by a newly released Senate report on Backpage and its role in trafficking – in particular of minors.

During a today hearing in the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs' Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, on which Heitkamp serves, the Subcommittee released a new report regarding its investigation of Backpage.com's role in the facilitation of sex trafficking. The report found that CEO Carl Ferrer – and key employees – of the website Backpage.com deliberately crafted loopholes that enabled the trafficking of men, women, and children online. Ferrer and senior leadership all claimed their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and refused to answer questions on company practices that led to the trafficking of children online. The Subcommittee also heard testimony from the parents of two trafficking victims – who were trafficked as minors on Backpage.

Last night, almost immediately after the public release of the Subcommittee's report, Backpage shut down the adult section of its website across the United States – effective immediately.

"Few crimes as ugly and dehumanizing as sex trafficking exist in this country, but even fewer are as unimaginable as the deliberate facilitation of the sale of children for sex online – unfortunately, that's exactly what this report concludes Backpage participated in and made



decisions based on – placing profit over morality and the protection of children,” said Heitkamp. “For years, Backpage has knowingly and shamefully profited from the illegal sale of men, women, and children – including a 14-year-old who was trafficked in Minot. But this report’s conclusions – that leaders of the website at the highest echelons worked to help traffickers circumvent the law – are even more sickening that most could have imagined. The audacity of a group of American citizens – the leaders at Backpage – wishing to hide behind the First Amendment during this hearing when they exploit children is beyond me. For over a year I’ve been working on this Subcommittee to make sure the victims of human trafficking and their families get answers, and it’s my hope that this report and its findings will lead to further charges against Backpage, and that it will allow for successful prosecutions and recovery of damages by the victims in courts around the country.”

The Subcommittee began its bipartisan investigation of human trafficking on the internet in April 2015. With estimated annual revenues of more than \$150 million, Backpage is a market leader in commercial sex advertising and has been linked to hundreds of reported cases of sex trafficking, including the trafficking of children. [Click here](#) to read the Subcommittee’s full report on Backpage. Some of the key findings include:

- **Backpage automatically deleted incriminating words from sex ads prior to publication:** These words included: lolita, teenage, rape, young, amber alert, fresh, innocent, and school girl. When a user would submit an adult-section ad using one or more of these words, Backpage would automatically delete the word-and then post the remainder of the ad. Over time, Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer personally directed or approved the addition of new words to the filter, including terms taken directly from reports on Backpage-related sex trafficking.
- **Backpage altered the evidentiary value of the original ads:** According to Backpage's own Chief Operations Officer, the filter was created in such a way that Backpage "wouldn't run the risk of caching stripped terms," potentially destroying criminal evidence. No communications were found in Backpage's files to suggest that law enforcement was ever informed that ads for sex trafficking and prostitution were being routinely edited by the company.
- **Backpage moderators manually deleted incriminating evidence in ads that automatic filters missed:** Manual editing would target words and phrases similar to those flagged in the filter, including terms that indicated criminal activity. While most of the terms that Backpage moderators would remove related to standard prostitution, some words specifically indicated child exploitation, such as "teen" and "young."
- **Backpage coached its users on how to post "clean ads" for illegal transactions:** At Ferrer's instructions, when a user attempted to post ads with even the most egregious banned words, the user would receive an error message identifying the problematic word choice. The site also used a similar approach for its age verification process. A contractor that helped create one of these error messages said, "Backpage executives

recognized that their filter would alert users to the use of a banned word and cause them to alter their future word choice, thereby resulting in a clean ad."

- **Backpage employees are aware that prostitution and child exploitation occur on the site, and may have intentionally underreported instances of child exploitation:** One former moderator asserted that all Backpage employees involved in adult moderation knew that the ads they reviewed were offering sex for money, and that some even used the services of prostitutes on the site. They "went through the motions putting lipstick on a pig, because when it came down to it, it was what the business was about."

Heitkamp has been working to help the Subcommittee gain information on how websites such as Backpage contribute to human trafficking and allow perpetrators to advertise their victims. In November 2015, [Heitkamp blasted Ferrer for refusing the Subcommittee's subpoena to testify](#) and for his company's refusal to provide information on its purported use of safeguards to prevent human traffickers from using the site as a platform. She then [voted unanimously along with the full Committee](#) to hold Ferrer and Backpage in civil contempt of Congress. That vote preceded the U.S. Senate's [unanimous vote in March](#), which Heitkamp joined, to launch civil contempt proceedings against site – the first time in 20 years the U.S. Senate has held anyone in contempt of Congress. Last October, Heitkamp called the [arrest of CEO Carl Ferrer a needed step](#) in halting his website's role in providing a platform for human trafficking.

Long an advocate against human trafficking, Heitkamp led an [initial hearing in September 2013](#) to sound the alarm on the prevalence of human trafficking right in our own backyard, including in North Dakota. Since then, Heitkamp has been a leader in fighting for legislative action to fight human trafficking, playing an [integral role in passing](#) in the U.S. Senate's bipartisan legislation. [Now law](#), the bill includes stricter punishments against traffickers who transport victims across state lines, and legal protections from [her Safe Harbor bill](#) to make sure victims are not treated as criminals. In addition to introducing [bipartisan legislation](#) to give health care providers – including doctors, nurses, and social workers – training to help identify and protect victims of human trafficking, Heitkamp is [continuing to push](#) the Senate protect runaway and homeless youth, some of the most susceptible targets of human traffickers, and successfully secured [landmark anti-human trafficking protections](#) for children in schools in the No Child Left Behind reform legislation.

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