

Remarks by Councilmember Tim Burgess, Seattle City Council
Human Trafficking
Washington State Senate Judiciary Committee
Olympia, Washington

January 27, 2012

Good afternoon, Senators. Human trafficking, including the sexual exploitation of children, is a difficult topic; it's not something we raise lightly. It demands moral clarity, careful examination, and the kind of bipartisan purposefulness you have demonstrated in your sponsorship of the package of bills you have under consideration.

Nearly 10 years ago, the Washington State Legislature led the nation in passing laws to criminalize human trafficking, but unfortunately the problem persists and is growing. There are some, however, who don't believe we have a problem and accuse us of exaggerating and sensationalizing, so we set out to get the facts.

Yesterday, my office completed compilation and review of a select set of criminal prosecutions in Seattle-King County involving some of the most serious offenses related to human trafficking—commercial sexual abuse of a minor, promoting prostitution in the first degree, rape of a child in the first degree and sex trafficking. We examined prosecutions stretching over a 42-month period ending last August. It is all documented in these notebooks I will leave with you.

Here's what we found. Sixty-seven offenders were charged and prosecuted by the King County Prosecuting Attorney in this 42-month period. These 67 offenders victimized more than 78 girls and women.

There is a common practice or pattern running through all of these cases—debilitating psychological abuse, threats of violence and acts of violence against each of the victims to destroy their self-respect and instill pervasive fear, all for the purpose of keeping the victims trapped in prostitution. This entrapment means they can be sold over and over again, providing a lucrative business for their pimps.

About 30% of the victims in these cases were 18 or older. Most were juveniles—many 16 or 17 years old, but a sizeable number as young as 13, 14 or 15. Nearly 60% of the juvenile victims were exploited through commercial advertising on backpage.com or other Internet sites.

Included in these notebooks for each case is the sworn "certification for determination of probable cause." I encourage you to read a few of these. They document the pattern of abusive and violent behavior that is routinely used to keep victims in submission. What you'll read is chilling. The legal terms we use for these offenses, like "commercial sexual abuse of a minor," only hint at the stark and bitter truth of what these victims live with on a daily basis.

Their suffering demands our attention and action. These girls and women are modern day slaves.

Remember, these extreme crimes are not limited to my city and county. There are similar cases across our state in Snohomish, Pierce, Spokane and Yakima counties. The extent to which these crimes are occurring in our communities is shocking and sobering

I join with Mayor McGinn, Chief Pugel, and the others who have come to the capitol today to support your bipartisan efforts to stop this exploitation. Please act quickly to put an end to the commercial sexual exploitation of our children through online advertising. Increase fees and require mandatory restitution by offenders. And let's help the victims vacate their prostitution convictions more quickly and collect damages from those who exploited them.

Please provide our police officers, prosecutors and judges the additional tools and authority they need to arrest and penalize those who prey on the vulnerable.