

Editorial: ‘Buyer Beware’ program a much-needed step toward protecting sex-trade victims

King County law enforcement officials are taking the right steps to address the demand side of the region’s sex trafficking crisis.

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KING County authorities are finally cracking down on men who sexually exploit others. The rise of online advertising has only fed and increased the demand for commercial sex, which victimizes women and girls as young as 12 years old.

[A promising initiative](#) announced Wednesday called “Buyer Beware” puts the King County Prosecutor’s Office, seven local law-enforcement agencies and community groups such as the Organization of Prostitution Survivors on the same path toward reducing commercial sexual exploitation.

Combining their resources for the first time, the coalition will enforce laws, deter those looking to purchase sex and prevent further suffering.

It’s about time.

For years, those caught working in prostitution have been arrested at higher rates than the men who buy the services, as reported this week by The Seattle Times’ Sara Jean Green. Many sex workers caught by police are juveniles controlled by pimps. They are child victims who desperately need care and access to services.

Now, the tables are turning against buyers who often feign ignorance about the real ages of these girls. The buyers are prolific in number, too. More than 27,000 men in King County solicit sex online each day, according to researchers at Arizona State University.

The vast majority of these johns get away with their crimes.

Enough.

“Buyer Beware” aims to curb demand by 20 percent over the next two years. Grants will fund training for police to conduct more stings, and arrest and prosecute buyers. Those convicted will have to take intervention courses similar to programs required of domestic-violence offenders.

Since so many of these encounters are initiated online, “Buyer Beware” wisely includes an online component where ads pop up when buyers type in certain terms. These ads will highlight the harmful effects of prostitution.

“We’re trying to encourage and to nudge and to cajole men into not buying sex in the first place,” says Val Richey, the county prosecutor’s lead attorney on prostitution-related crimes.

The state Supreme Court could underscore the intentions of this effort by allowing a case out of Pierce County to move forward. Three teenage sex trafficking victims are trying to hold Backpage.com liable for damages after their bodies were advertised in its lucrative adult section. The court will hear arguments next Tuesday.

The county’s pilot program is an ambitious, worthy step toward protecting women and girls from the ravages of a misogynistic industry. It’s also a noteworthy shift in the mindset of law-enforcement officials that needs to spread to other jurisdictions.

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