

Clergy petition Village Voice to drop ads linked to sex trafficking

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(RNS) Three dozen religious leaders have signed an ad calling on Village Voice Media to remove an adult section of its BackPage.com that they and others claim is a conduit for child sex trafficking.

“As moral and religious leaders of many creeds and backgrounds, we are united in calling on your publication to shut down the Adult section of Backpage.com,” reads an open letter to Village Voice Media CEO Jim Larkin in an ad published Tuesday (Oct. 25) in The New York Times.

The ad lists 14 states in which adults have been arrested for selling minors for sex using BackPage.com, according to media reports.

In a July statement, Backpage.com spokesperson Steve Suskin said the site is committed to preventing people from misusing it for illegal activity.

“We have implemented a series of new safety enhancements over the past several months to better protect our communities and will continue to further increase our safety practices,” he said.

But the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist leaders said they were not satisfied with the steps taken by the alternative weekly newspaper chain.

“We appreciate your efforts to put in place new measures attempting to screen for ads featuring minors,” they wrote in the ad. “However, we do not believe that these measures are doing enough to adequately solve the problem.”

The site's “safety and security backgrounder” was updated on Sept. 29 and notes that it has implemented a “no nudity policy.”

Actor Ashton Kutcher, who co-chairs an anti-trafficking foundation with his wife, actress Demi Moore, also has criticized BackPage.com, reportedly tweeting that it is

a "digital brothel."