

# HOUSE BILL REPORT

## SJM 8003

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**As Passed House:**  
March 5, 2014

**Brief Description:** Requesting Congress to amend the Communications Decency Act.

**Sponsors:** Senators Kohl-Welles, Padden, Kline, Roach, Fraser, Carrell, Darneille, Pearson, Conway and Chase.

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:**

Technology & Economic Development: 2/20/14, 2/26/14 [DP].

**Floor Activity:**

Passed House: 3/5/14, 98-0.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Petitions Congress and the President to amend the Communications Decency Act of 1996 to authorize states to enact and enforce laws holding Internet service providers liable when they knowingly facilitate child sex trafficking through the sale of adult escort advertisements.

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### HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Majority Report:** Do pass. Signed by 18 members: Representatives Morris, Chair; Habib, Vice Chair; Smith, Ranking Minority Member; Short, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Dahlquist, DeBolt, Fey, Freeman, Hudgins, Kochmar, Magendanz, Ryu, Stonier, Tarleton, Vick, Walsh, Wylie and Zeiger.

**Staff:** Jasmine Vasavada (786-7301).

**Background:**

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) was enacted in 1996 to promote, among other stated policies, the continued development of the Internet and other interactive computer services and media. Also known as the "Safe Harbor" provision, Section 230 provides Internet service providers (ISPs) and intermediaries with immunity from liability for online content created or posted by third parties. Prior to passage of Section 230, some

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courts had found that a website could be sued or prosecuted for harmful content posted by the website's visitors. Such rulings were consistent with common law doctrines that hold publishers or speakers liable for defamatory or otherwise harmful speech. In enacting Section 230, Congress provided that ISPs and intermediaries shall not be treated as the "publisher" or "speaker" of any information provided by a third-party, providing immunity from liability even if they have actual notice of the harmful or offensive content posted and fail to take action.

Congress also prohibited states from passing laws that are "inconsistent" with Section 230. State laws that would criminalize the publication of certain offensive third-party advertisements fall squarely within the scope of Section 230 immunity. In 2012 Washington enacted Senate Bill 6251 (SB 6251), creating the felony offense of "Advertising Commercial Sexual Abuse of a Minor." Before the law went into effect, an operator of an online classified advertising service, Backpage.com, filed an action in federal court to enjoin its enforcement. The federal district court referenced statements in the docket that many child prostitutes are advertised through online escort advertisements displayed on Backpage.com and similar websites. However, the court granted a preliminary injunction to stop enforcement of SB 6251. Among other grounds for enjoining enforcement of SB 6251, the court found that it is likely inconsistent with and therefore expressly preempted by Section 230. In the final settlement of the case, the Washington State Attorney General agreed not to appeal the decision or take further action to enforce the statute.

#### **Summary of Bill:**

The Legislature enacts a joint memorial urging Congress to amend the CDA of 1996 to reflect the current scope and power of the Internet, to acknowledge the publisher-like role of companies like Backpage.com, and to authorize states to enact and enforce laws holding ISPs liable when they knowingly facilitate child sex trafficking through the sale of adult escort advertisements.

In this joint memorial, the Legislature makes certain findings, including but not limited to the following:

- that the Internet has changed dramatically over the past 17 years;
- that companies such as Backpage.com earn millions of dollars annually from the sale of location-specific Internet advertisements, some of which directly facilitate the sex trafficking of minors and other victims; and
- that unless Congress changes Section 230, states will remain powerless to enact meaningful reforms to hold accountable those ISPs who profit by turning a blind-eye to the role in facilitating crimes against children.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Not requested.

#### **Staff Summary of Public Testimony:**

(In support) This joint memorial is very important. Washington was the first state to enact legislation to take on the issue of escort advertisements posted on websites like

Backpage.com. The Legislature worked with the Attorney General to develop a law that would surely pass muster with the CDA and the First Amendment. The Legislature created a new crime of Advertising Commercial Sexual Abuse of a Minor, which has been a crime in statute since 2007, and gave an affirmative defense for online or print publishers who actually verify the age of the person depicted in the advertisement. This is a huge issue here and in other states. The Seattle Police Department and other law enforcement agencies are tracking the activities on websites like Backpage.com and have rescued kids. These kids should not be referred to as prostitutes. They have been victimized and exploited and need to be rescued but they should never be placed in advertisement without verification of their age. Seattle Weekly has been requiring in-person age verification in their print publications and has severed their relationship with Backpage.com and Village Voice, the umbrella organization. Backpage.com has admitted to making \$21 million a year. The Seattle Stranger requires in-person age verification even for online advertisement. The bill petitions Congress to revisit the CDA. The Internet has changed so significantly that this issue needs to be addressed. Kids should not be trafficked over the Internet and there must be some way to allow states to be involved. Yesterday morning the United States Congress' Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Human Resources, chaired by David Reichert and ranking member Jim McDermott, held a hearing at Auburn City Hall. The two congressmen are very interested in exploring this issue. It deserves the committee's support.

(Opposed) None.

**Persons Testifying:** Senator Kohl-Welles, prime sponsor.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** None.