

Religious leaders press Village Voice on sex ads

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Religious leaders on Thursday (March 29) delivered more than 230,000 signatures to the office of Village Voice Media, demanding the company shut down the adult advertising section on its website, Backpage.com, where advertisements for sex with underage minors have appeared.

"As a mother and as a member of the clergy, I am outraged by Village Voice Media's continued refusal to shut down Backpage.com's adult section, even after being confronted with evidence that girls and teens have been advertised for sex on the site," said the Rev. Katharine Henderson, president of Auburn Seminary and a leader of the petition.

Leaders from an array of religious groups, including Jews, Sikhs, Baptists, Hindus, and Muslims, have joined together in the fight against sex trafficking.

They are demanding the adult section be removed after multiple cases of minors being sold for sex were traced back to the site, which is owned by Village Voice Media, which produces New York's Village Voice newspaper.

Amanda Kloer, campaign director at Change.org, said the campaign was started by more than 650 faith leaders on Change.org in 2011, and thousands have come together because "they consider sex trafficking a common moral issue."

The religious leaders and their supporters also plan to deliver 100 pairs of girls' shoes to represent the "unseen victims of child sex trafficking in the United States."

Village Voice Media has defended the site, most recently responding to a March 17 article in The New York Times.

"Backpage dedicates hundreds of staff to screen adult classifieds in order to keep juveniles off the site and to work proactively with law enforcement in their efforts to locate victims," the company said. "For the first time in the history of sex work, law enforcement has, because of the Internet, the ability to shine a light upon those who would abuse children."