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Minnesota technologists join forces to fight online child sex trafficking

A recent high-profile case involving the trafficking of minors for sex by a well-connected financier made headlines around the world. But for every victim uncovered by the media, there are thousands more spread out across the country – their numbers and markets multiplied by the sheer pervasiveness of technology.

The internet and social media are gaining an outsized role in how victims are found, bought and sold, with transactions involving the abuse of minors done no differently from how you and I shop for clothes and shoes online.

With the role of technology in perpetuating the abuse, it is abundantly clear that technology is also the means to stay ahead of traffickers. Minnesota companies will get a chance to play their part by bringing together some of the private sector's top data scientists to work on ways to spot victims and abusers online and to rid the internet of child sexual content. It's an initiative that's led by CWT, a Minnesota-based global travel management company, that has long championed anti-human trafficking efforts, including the trafficking of minors.

In the Twin Cities alone, a six-month study by local prosecutors found over 34,000 advertisements posted online for sex, according to the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison. In at least 82% of juvenile trafficking cases in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, from January 2012 to August 2016, sex buyers entered the market through backpage dot com and other online media, according to WATCH, a nonprofit monitor of the justice system in Minnesota, now part of the Advocates for Human Rights.

As the chief information officer at CWT, I come at this from four different perspectives. First and foremost, I am the father of two children whose safety and wellbeing I deeply safeguard and cherish.

Second, I work in the travel industry, where historically, trafficking has been commonly associated with transporting victims across borders and illicit activity occurring in hotels. As we now know, trafficking in the U.S. often happens domestically with no need to cross state lines, much less a national border, and the abuse can take place anywhere. Globally, 77% of victims are exploited within their country of residence, according to a 2019 Trafficking in Persons report by the State Department.

Third, Carlson, CWT's parent company, has had a long history of fighting anti-trafficking, dating back to the 1990s. In 2004, we were the first travel and hospitality company to sign ECPAT's Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism (The Code) at the request of UNICEF and the U.S. State Department. When Minnesota hosted the Super Bowl in 2018, Carlson and the Carlson Family Foundation collaborated with local organizations and community leaders in creating a replicable plan to curtail sex trafficking at large-scale events. Carlson also co-founded the World Childhood Foundation, which supports at-risk children globally, including victims of sex trafficking.

Carlson and CWT have partnered with governments and organizations on all fronts in the fight against trafficking, which brings me to my fourth point – my belief in the role that technology must play and the contribution our own technologists can make—to end this scourge.

On the first weekend of October, a hackathon that aims to use technology against child sex trafficking will come to Minnesota, following similar events in New York and San Francisco. It will be led by a non-profit organization we've partnered with called Thorn, founded by Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, whose mission is to build and use technology to defend children from sexual abuse. Over 200 investigators and 75 law enforcement agencies in Minnesota use Thorn's technology, and it is expanding throughout the Midwest.

The Minnesota hackathon will bring together 50 of the most talented technologists and engineers from the Twin Cities business community to chip away at this massive problem, one technology tool at a time. Technologists will spend the weekend volunteering their considerable professional skills to fighting abuse and trafficking using a variety of approaches, including data analysis, natural language processing, computer vision and machine learning that can help find victims faster and scrub the internet of child sexual abuse materials.

In so doing, we hope to raise awareness in our communities here in Minnesota that domestic minor sex trafficking is present in all 50 states. We need to be educated in the role that technology plays in child sexual exploitation and the many resources that are available online, and off, to curtail this illicit activity.

Whether it's conducting trafficking training for employees, supporting a local organization working to provide services for survivors, or reporting suspicious online activity or possible child trafficking – this is an issue that deserves our attention – and action – long after the news cycle has passed.

John Pelant is the chief information officer at CWT.

This op-ed piece originally appeared in the [Pioneer Press](#), a leading daily in Minnesota.

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CWT is a Business-to-Business-for-Employees (B2B4E) travel management platform. Companies and governments rely on us to keep their people connected – anywhere, anytime, anyhow – and across six continents, we provide their employees with innovative technology and an efficient, safe and secure travel experience. Every single day, we look after enough travelers to fill more than 100,000 hotel rooms, while our meetings and events division handles more than 100 events every 24 hours.

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