Gov. Jindal Supports Toughening Laws on Sex Trafficking (March 18): Human sex trafficking is the second-largest criminal industry in the world today. That’s according to Gov. Bobby Jindal who backed a bill Tuesday that would toughen the laws on trafficking in the state. A new bill making its way through the Legislature aims to help women. It would allow victims to file a motion to vacate a conviction for prostitution-related offenses. The bill, filed by State Rep. Neil Abramson of New Orleans, also says people who purchase sex and commit the crime with a minor must register as a sex offender. Rafael Salcedo, Ph.D., has worked with victims of sex trafficking for years and is in the process of opening a home on the Northshore for victims to live in. He says until about four years ago, penalties were quite lax for pimps and johns. But the tide is turning. “It’s taken awhile for these developments to take place because it’s required a change in the way people think about this,” said Salcedo. Salcedo says now, men who are convicted of sex trafficking offenses can get up to 50 years in prison depending on the age of the victim. Another bill Jindal is backing calls for district courts to designate a section or division of court just for human trafficking cases. Salcedo explains, “Similar to drug court or mental health court, the specialized training that prosecutors, that defense attorneys, that judges need, can be concentrated as opposed to having to reinvent the wheel in each case in the different parishes in Louisiana.” Rafael Salcedo says the state doesn’t have enough options for young women to turn to when they finally escape from the sex trade.

Despite Support, Sex Trade Bill Faces Uphill Battle (March 16): Cook County prosecutors are working with Sen. Mark Kirk on a different approach — a new federal law that focuses on the Internet sex trade, making it possible to criminally charge site operators who sell or promote ads that facilitate sex crimes, including prostitution and trafficking. Jack Blakey, head of special prosecutions for the Cook County state’s attorney’s office, said the law aims to strike at the “centralized and nationalized” aspect of a website such as Backpage, which provides traffickers a way to ply their illicit trade by moving people around quickly and anonymously. In announcing the legislation last week, Kirk singled out Jim Larkin and Michael Lacey, the unapologetic owners of Backpage.com, even though any Web operator in violation of the act could face charges under his proposal. The Arizona-based pair — award-winning journalists who have exposed corruption and raised awareness about social issues such as immigration and civil rights abuses — sold their interest in Village Voice Media, which publishes alternative newspapers across the country, two years ago to focus on the more lucrative website. The site, which promotes classified ads in a format similar to Craigslist, charges $5 to $10 per post. On the Chicago page alone during one recent 24-hour period, there were about 400 advertisements for female escorts. Pages promoting male escorts, body rubs and fetish services also had dozens of advertisements. And its market share has grown since 2009, when Craigslist bowed to pressure and stopped accepting ads for erotic services. An ongoing civil suit brought in Washington state on behalf of three minors alleged that the company earned $20 million annually from the ads sold under the escort category alone. Other court records also outline a brisk business for Backpage.com — calling it the second largest online advertising service — with 3.3 million user ads posted in one month of 2012.
Arizona Republic

Combating Sex Crimes a Priority for Phoenix (March 14): Phoenix leaders say a recent report minimizing the connection between the Super Bowl and sex trafficking will not decrease the city's efforts to combat the crime. Researchers from Arizona State University released a report last week that said Internet sex-trafficking crimes during the Super Bowl are no higher than during any other time. Although links between the large sporting event and online sex trafficking exist, they are often greatly exaggerated, said Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, director of ASU's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research. Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton formed a task force in December to address child sex trafficking during the Super Bowl in response to reports. Phoenix Vice Mayor Jim Waring, who chairs the Child Trafficking Task Force, said while the Super Bowl might have been the impetus for the task force, the city's intention was always to look beyond the sporting event. The fact that the report showed that minors are being trafficked in Phoenix period shows the need for the task force, Waring said.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Congresswoman Takes Aim at Backpage and Sex Trafficking (March 13): Beneath the historic dome of the Old Courthouse, U.S. Rep. Ann Wagner on Thursday announced a proposed law that would shut down and criminalize marketplaces that willfully promote sex trafficking. Wagner, R-Ballwin, cited the 1857 Dred Scott trial which took place in the historic courthouse and “aroused public outrage over slavery.” Wagner, a former European ambassador, said she had long been involved in curbing sex trafficking internationally. But she was dismayed to learn that more than 300,000 American youths are at risk of trafficking annually in the United States, and that the youths typically enter the sex trade when they are 13 or 14. St. Louis ranks in the top 20 cities nationally for sex trafficking, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The Stop Advertising Victims of Exploitation bill — or SAVE — filed in Congress today targets enterprises such as Backpage, an online and print advertising marketplace that generates more than $37 million a year in revenue and is estimated to garner more than 80 percent of advertising profits generated by the sex trade. Wagner's office said revenue from U.S. online prostitution advertising totaled $45 million in 2013, surpassing a benchmark set when Craigslist abandoned its adult services section in 2010. The law proposes amending federal code offenses to criminalize the sales or promotion of advertisements that facilitate human trafficking. Wagner said it gives prosecutors greater power to charge those engaging in such activity with a federal crime. Wagner said the measure would protect First Amendment rights and third parties who might unwillingly aid in sex trafficking.

How Cellphone Photos of a Hotel Room Might Combat Sex Trafficking (March 11): The photographs on a popular online site advertising “escort” services showed three young women selling their bodies, posed against floor-to-ceiling windows of the same high-rise hotel. Hotel rooms by their very nature often feel anonymous, but the view beyond the women in the windows was unmistakable: the landmark green dome of St. Louis’ Old
Courthouse adjacent to the easily identifiable facade of another downtown building. Photographs of the hotel's interior posted by guests on an online travel site confirmed that the style of desk on which the one young woman was posed matched the desks used inside Crowne Plaza guest rooms in St. Louis. Making this solid connection between sex trafficking and the specific places it happens is at the heart of a new effort driven by three St. Louis area women. Molly Hackett, Jane Quinn and Kimberly Ritter are developing a website of hotel room photographs that can be accessed by police and the public hoping to track down both victims of sex trafficking — many as young as 13 — and their pimps. The website is in initial development and needs about $200,000 in funding. When it is ready, images sent by hotel patrons will be cataloged by hotel name, city and date taken and possibly made searchable by room color or other basic decor.

**Arizona Daily Star**

**More Crime Victims Seeking Special Immigration Visa** (March 12): Each year, more crime victims apply for immigration visas under a program designed to boost cooperation with law enforcement. Applications for so-called “U visas” more than tripled between fiscal year 2009 and the one that ended Sept. 31. More than 25,000 people applied last fiscal year, but only 10,000 spots are available annually, figures from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show. The cap has been met each of the past four fiscal years, and this year’s allotment is already distributed, with more than six months remaining. Still, federal officials are on a nationwide campaign to spread the word, especially about the visas available to victims of human trafficking. They attribute the jump in applications to their outreach campaign and see the uptick as a positive sign — more law-enforcement agencies are participating and more immigrants are aware of the protections. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act created the visas in 2000, but they were first formally distributed in 2008, he said. About 20 percent of applications are denied, according to U.S. Customs and Immigration Services data. Whelan couldn’t say how many denials were due to fraud, but said the department takes the issue seriously and has specialized units combing through applications.

**Kansas City Star**

**Sex Trade in Eight Cities, Including Kansas City, Is Worth nearly $1 Billion** (March 12): A study released Wednesday about the world’s oldest profession concludes that the lucrative underground commercial sex economy in eight large U.S. metropolitan areas brings in anywhere from $40 million annually to as much as nearly $300 million. The unprecedented 340-page study by the Urban Institute, a policy research group, finds -- not surprisingly -- that the reach of the Internet has facilitated the flesh trade and made it harder to combat. The report and its in-depth interviews with 73 convicted pimps and traffickers also challenges conventional wisdom on the illicit side of the sex industry. “We often think about the commercial sex economy as a hustle, where there's no real thought or planning that's involved,” said Meredith Dank, the lead researcher on the exhaustive study funded by the Justice Department. “But we found . . . the opposite that some pimps and traffickers actually had a business model they followed.” And business has been good. In seven of the eight cities, the commercial sex
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trade had a combined estimated annual cash value of $975.3 million, the study found. Researchers were unable to estimate the economic size of the business in one city: Kansas City, Mo. In Seattle, the $112 million estimate for 2007 was more than double the 2003 estimate of $50 million. The study did not differentiate between forced and unforced prostitution, but it did have another surprise finding: The recruitment and pimping of women is no longer just a man’s world. The study is novel in that it builds off of existing data on the illegal trade of drugs and weapons and uses them as a proxy to construct a model for measuring the economics of the commercial sex trade. The sex trade has evolved. Gone are the days of colorful brothels, scantily clad prostitutes on bustling street corners or flashy pimps who control a range of illicit activities in a particular neighborhood. The commercial sex trade is widely segmented, the report found. There’s still common street-level prostitution _ almost exclusively men and women selling themselves in impoverished neighborhoods to feed a drug habit. The price of the sex act in this commercial activity, say in Kansas City, was almost directly tied to the price of crack cocaine or heroin, researchers said. Another surprise is that in the eight cities, researchers did not find a strong link between the commercial sex trade and trafficking of guns and drugs. They operated largely independent of each other, although there was evidence of gang involvement in the coerced sex trade.

Latino Fox News

U.S., Mexico, Guatemala to Create Security Coalition to Fight Drug, Human Trafficking, Arms Smuggling (March 9): Security officials from Mexico, the United States and Guatemala agreed to create the Trinational Security Desk to fight people trafficking, arms smuggling, drug trafficking and other crimes in a coordinated manner at their borders, the Mexican National Security Commission said. Mexican Federal Police commissioner Enrique Galindo Ceballos met with U.S. Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary of International Affairs and Chief Diplomatic Officer Alan Bersin and Guatemalan Government Minister Mauricio Lopez Bonilla to discuss border security, the commission said in a statement. Galindo Ceballos told Bersin and Lopez Bonilla at their meeting in Guatemala City that the National Security Commission was committed to bilateral efforts to promote border security and monitoring to reduce crime.

Las Vegas Sun

Targeting the Johns in the Sex Trade (March 4): There’s a growing awareness that sex trafficking is one of the most serious human rights abuses around, with some 100,000 juveniles estimated to be trafficked into the sex trade in the United States each year. Police increasingly recognize that the simplest way to reduce the scale of human trafficking is to arrest men who buy sex. That isn’t prudishness or sanctimony but a strategy to dampen demand. Polling suggests that about 15 percent of American men have bought sex, and back-of-envelope calculations suggest that a man has about a 1 in 100,000 chance of being arrested while doing so. An understanding is growing that this isn’t about policing morals but about protecting human rights. In more and more states, pimps are prosecuted more often and minors are not arrested in prostitution cases but are directed to social programs. Sometimes that’s true of women, too. As appreciation grows that human trafficking is one of the most serious of
human rights abuses, so is the recognition that a starting point in addressing it is to stop making excuses for the men who perpetuate it — and start arresting them.

Boston Globe

Prostitution Moving to the ‘Burbs (March 2): As prostitution increasingly transitioned from dark alleys and street corners in cities to the online world over the past dozen or so years, suburbs themselves have become hubs of the sex trade industry in hotels, residences, and businesses, such as massage parlors, serving as fronts for prostitution activity, according to observers and law enforcement officials. While sex-for-pay may have increased in the suburbs, it is also likely that the uptick reflects tougher enforcement and better tracking tools leading to more recorded cases. In the nearly three years since the state adopted a comprehensive human-trafficking law, Attorney General Martha Coakley’s office has charged 15 individuals in connection with sex trafficking. Every one of those cases is directly tied to suburbs outside of Boston, including Braintree, Chelsea, Plymouth, Revere, Tewksbury, and Wellesley. The same online sites used to order a smorgasbord of sexual activity anywhere and everywhere are also being monitored by law enforcement agencies throughout the suburbs, as local police step up efforts to combat prostitution and human trafficking. While enforcement once focused on the prostitutes walking the streets, it has now expanded to include the johns, Ferullo said.