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To Curb Human Trafficking, Montgomery County Lawmakers Target Johns

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The latest crackdown on human trafficking in Montgomery County tackles an age-old question: Is it supply or demand causing the problem? County lawmakers have decided to go after the demand.

One of the many things fueling the rise in human trafficking is prostitution. County Councilman Tom Hucker says Montgomery County is becoming a very popular place for human trafficking rings to bring prostitutes to johns. That's because of the county's affluence, large number of hotels, and most importantly, its location along both the I-95 and I-270 corridors.

Hucker recently went with police on a sting at a Silver Spring hotel.

"They run an ad [on the website] Backpage. And men in Montgomery County respond to the ad by coming to pre-arranged appointments in the hotel. And there must have been at least 10 men showed up with one hour of the ad being available," Hucker says.

But Hucker says all police usually give to those caught is a stern lecture. While soliciting a prostitute is against Maryland state law, it is not against Montgomery County law.

And Hucker says that leads to this: "The state's attorney's office has limited resources. It's been their practice not to prosecute any purchasers of prostitution unless there are aggravating circumstances, like if there are guns, or drugs, or children involved."

Hucker and his colleagues thought that was not enough to deter human trafficking rings. So they've made solicitation a county offense now, punishable by fine.

"If you're at a parking meter for just a minute or two over, you get a significant fine. If you're contributing to growing demand for human trafficking in Montgomery County, you walk away cost-free."

The fines are the highest allowed by state law: up to \$500 for the first offense. The hope is that will drive down demand for prostitutes, and therefore drive down the supply from human traffickers.