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Atlanta joins fight against Backpage's alleged role in promoting sex trafficking

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The city teamed with Denver, Houston, Philadelphia, Portland, Ore., and San Francisco, to file a friend of the court brief in support of a federal lawsuit against Backpage.com, a prominent national website known for posting "escort" advertisements, for its alleged role in promoting sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The underlying case, which is currently pending in U.S. District Court in Massachusetts, was brought by three teenagers who, according to a complaint filed by the Boston-based law firm of [Ropes & Gray](#) LLP, were victimized by sex trafficking schemes that Backpage.com enabled. Together with their parents, the teens seek damages against Backpage's owners and operators, arguing that Backpage knowingly facilitated commercial sex transactions in violation of state and federal law.

Backpage has moved to dismiss of the civil suit, contending it is immune from liability under a federal law intended to protect neutral Internet service providers and those who act as good Samaritans by filtering objectionable content.

According to San Francisco City Attorney [Dennis Herrera](#), Backpage based its motion on a provision in the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which was intended to protect passive domain hosts and neutral Internet service providers from liability for the actions of third-party content providers. But a relevant provision provides no immunity to Backpage because it "allegedly does far more than simply display ads submitted by third parties. Instead, it actively aids sex trafficking by materially contributing to the development and promotion of advertisements to sell children for sex on its website, and by engaging in business practices that communicate to posters and users the information that the 'Escorts' section of the website is a marketplace for the illegal sale of sex."

Backpage could not be immediately reached for comment.

Atlanta, Denver, Houston, Philadelphia, Portland, Ore., and San Francisco are among the country's top markets for the sex trafficking of minors, according to the motion filed on Feb. 19 and are among the nation's top 25 cities in the number of children rescued from underage prostitution in a nationwide [FBI](#) raid.

Phil W. Hudson is a finance, music and sports reporter.