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News

Police warn of online danger after string of violent crimes related to social website

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By Ann Zaniwski
For the Press & Guide

Two men were sent to prison for the rest of their lives in April for the shooting death and robbery of Venkata Cattamanchi outside a Southfield motel.

Prosecutors said Cattamanchi was set up, believing he was going to the motel to have an encounter with a prostitute he met through an ad on the website **Backpage.com**.

Backpage.com, a collection of online classified ads, has been in the news recently following the deaths of four women in Detroit.

Police have said that three of the four women who were found dead in car trunks had placed sex-related ads on the site.

Backpage.com is used to buy and sell things, but also carries personal ads. Under a heading marked "adult," there are categories such as "escorts," "body rubs" and "strippers & strip clubs."

Attorneys general for 45 states had raised concerns earlier this year about how the site polices ads for adult services.

Steve Suskin, an attorney for **Backpage.com**, said in a statement emailed to reporters Thursday that the company is cooperating with Detroit police and has given them detailed information, including about postings on a number of other websites.

As police continue to investigate the cases out of Detroit, members of the local law enforcement community are urging people to exercise caution when using the Internet to connect with others.

"If you're going to meet someone on the Internet, be very careful," said Oakland County Chief Assistant Prosecutor Paul Walton. "You don't know who you're communicating with. It's very, very easy to create a fictitious profile. You don't know what their true motives are."

Along with Cattamanchi's killing, at least two other high-profile crimes to land in Oakland County courtrooms during the past several months had ties to websites.

Johnathan Clements, 19, was fatally shot in February moments after leaving his aunt's Hazel Park home to meet the person he believed was going to sell him a cell phone. Clements had earlier posted an ad on the website Craigslist seeking to buy a new cell phone.

Two people — Alexander Lyons and Lamar Clemons — were convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

In another incident, authorities said Torrie Emery argued with a woman named Danielle Booth on Facebook about a man before a July 2010 fatal traffic crash in Pontiac.

Police said Emery rammed and chased at high speeds the Ford Taurus that 21-year-old Alesha Abernathy was driving. Abernathy's car collided with a truck, and she was killed. Booth, the passenger in Abernathy's car, was seriously injured.

Emery was sentenced in January 2011 to serve more than 18 years in prison.

In Detroit, the badly burned bodies of two women ages 28 and 29 were found Christmas morning in the trunk of a car that had been set on fire in a garage.

Two other women, Detroit residents Demesha Hunt, 24, and Renisha Landers, 23, were found dead Dec. 19 in a separate car trunk.

Suskin said in his statement Thursday that **Backpage.com** officials reached out to Detroit police to assist with the investigation.

"Backpage has now provided law enforcement authorities with computer, forensic or other evidence that shows that at least 70 different third-party ads or other postings on at least 22 different websites appear to be or are potentially related to this investigation," he said.

"We are not aware of any evidence that would indicate which of these 22 websites may have been used by the suspect to establish contact with his victims."

Suskin said **Backpage.com** shares the concerns of law enforcement and the community "that every effort be made to stop violent criminals from using the Internet to commit their crimes." He offered condolences to the victims' families.

On a blog on **Backpage.com**, an entry from July says the company had implemented several new safety enhancements, such as strict content policies aimed at preventing illegal activity.

An October post related to a request from religious clergy that **Backpage.com** shut down its adult classifieds says the website has extensive working relationships with law enforcement agencies as part of a concerted effort to protect children from predators.

"It is true that, in carrying out their crimes, criminals continue to utilize services such as cell phones by Verizon and AT&T, and overnight delivery services such as FedEx and numerous Internet sites. But that does not shift the blame from criminal predators to legal business operators," the blog post reads.

"If someone is caught shipping contraband through the Post Office, we do not shut down the U.S. mail."

Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette was among a group of attorneys general from across the country who wrote **Backpage.com** on Aug. 31 demanding that it show it was not promoting illegal sexual activity. Officials had raised similar concerns about Craigslist, which agreed to close its adult services section in 2010.

Walton, from the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, said people can never be sure that a person they've met online is being truthful or has good intentions.

"On my Facebook page, (I can be) 6 feet tall and run a mile in 5:45. That doesn't make it true," he said.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard encourages people not to meet in person with strangers they first encountered online.

But both he and Walton said if a person does want to connect face-to-face, reasonable precautions should be taken. Meet the person in a well-lit, public place, and bring at least one or two other people with you, they said.

Walton also said it's a good idea to tell other people where you're going, who you're meeting and exactly how long you expect to be gone. Never invite a stranger to meet at your house, he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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