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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Washington & Ramsey County Attorneys announce joint prosecution against four defendants in racketeering/human trafficking enterprise** *Profiteering operation exploited numerous foreign victims; ads posted in 29 states*

Saint Paul – Washington County Attorney Pete Orput and Ramsey County Attorney John Choi today announced multiple racketeering and sex trafficking charges against four (4) individuals in Minnesota and Orange County, California. The four are charged with Racketeering, Sex Trafficking, Promotion of Prostitution, Concealing Criminal Proceeds and Engaging in the Business of Concealing Criminal Proceeds in connection with a criminal enterprise profiteering off the sale of vulnerable human beings for sex.

“The enormity of this criminal enterprise across the entirety of the United States is ample proof of the pervasive nature of sex and human trafficking here in Minnesota,” said Washington County Attorney Pete Orput. “Hopefully, this investigation and prosecution will cement in the mind’s eye of the general public the breadth of this problem which law enforcement has to confront.”

The charges are a result of a coordinated multi-agency investigation, which included: Washington County Attorney’s Office, Woodbury Police Department, Saint Paul Police Department, Ramsey County Attorney’s Office, Oakdale Police Department, Cottage Grove Police Department and Minneapolis Police Department.

“This significant bust of an international human trafficking ring happened as a direct result of the coordinated efforts of law enforcement and prosecutors in Minnesota, determined to end the trafficking of human beings in our state,” said Ramsey County Attorney John Choi. “These victims were especially vulnerable, as they were trapped in a foreign country where they barely spoke the language and sold for sex. Today marks significant progress in our statewide efforts to combat human trafficking and we want to thank all of the agencies involved for their collaboration.”

According to the criminal complaint, the investigation uncovered an operation out of Irvine, California, which trafficked women who are Chinese nationals for the purpose of prostitution across the country, including in Minnesota. The criminal enterprise, consisting of the four (4) charged defendants, was connected to numerous victims and thousands of advertisements for sexual services placed on Backpage.com in 29 states over the past two years. Investigators documented multiple places of operation for the Minnesota-based branch including Oakdale; Cottage Grove; Saint Paul; Blaine; Maplewood; St. Louis Park; Fargo, North Dakota; and Irvine, California.

The charges announced today are in connection with six of the victims, highlighted in the complaint. Victims were required to work 12-14 hour days, and had to pay their traffickers house fees, transportation costs, hotel expenses, as well as provide their own food. Victims had no personal connections in the area in which they were sold, and some were forced to relinquish their passports. One of the defendants described the brutality of the victims' experiences and said they were frequently assaulted, raped, and robbed by customers, details that were corroborated through cell phone photos of their injuries.

Investigators learned from defendants as well as financial ledgers recovered from some of the physical locations how each victim fulfilled her obligations as part of the trafficking enterprise. The women were required to earn a minimum of \$800 per day through the sale of sexual services or risk being fired. Further investigation into the financial side of the operation revealed tens of thousands of dollars from trafficking operations being deposited into each of the defendants' bank accounts. An account held by one defendant recently had a balance in excess of \$850,000, the bulk of which was used to purchase a home in the U.S.

It should be noted that a criminal complaint is merely an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.

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Note: Ramsey County Attorney John Choi and Washington County Attorney Pete Orput are both available for comment. Please call Dennis Gerhardstein if you would like to arrange for an interview.