

HALL OF JUSTICE
330 WEST BROADWAY
SAN DIEGO, CA 92101
(619) 531-4040
SanDiegoDA.com

OFFICE OF
THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

DAVID P. GREENBERG
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY

SUMMER STEPHAN
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

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Contact: [Steve Walker](#) (619) 531-3890
[Tanya Sierra](#) (619) 531-3315
En Español [Barbara Medina](#) (619) 531-3305

DA Warns of Online Threats Amid COVID-19, Provides Resources for Survivors of Human Trafficking

New Reporting Shows Online Exploitation of Youth Up Significantly

San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan today urged parents to be more aware of increased online dangers children face amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and urged parents to take steps to prevent young people from becoming victims of human trafficking. The DA also reminded survivors of human trafficking that there are important resources available to help them move forward with their lives. The warning comes during National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, which is held each January.

The most common way victims are trafficked in San Diego County is online, through social media and gaming apps, an issue that is concerning especially now that children are spending more time than ever online due to school closures related to COVID-19. Reports of technology-based exploitation have tripled at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Local reports have also increased – in 2019, the San Diego Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force (ICAC) received 3,058 cyber tips and in 2020 the numbers almost doubled to 5,885.

“Pre-pandemic, we could count on teachers and other school mandated reporters to notice some of the signs that a student is being abused at home or sexually exploited by a trafficker and to report to law enforcement,” said District Attorney Summer Stephan. **“Now that children are stuck mostly at home, it’s up to the parents, guardians and responsible adults to help children understand the risks they may face online and make them feel comfortable reporting suspicious recruitment and enticement or victimization. There are tools to help parents and kids understand the threat from traffickers and abusers in order to prevent harm to our children. The San Diego Trafficking Prevention Collective is a private-public partnership with the mission of protecting students by building knowledge has converted many resources on line at [SanDiegoTPC.org](#), and the San Diego Regional Human Trafficking Task Force has been working around the clock to safeguard our kids from human trafficking.”**

The DA is also reminding survivors of human trafficking that there is now a legal path for them to clear their record. The San Diego DA’s Office worked with the Office of the Public Defender, legal

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services providers and the Courts to implement a criminal *vacatur* law, which is a new form of post-conviction relief that allows human trafficking survivors to clear non-violent criminal charges related to their exploitation. The *vacatur* law is codified under California Penal Code 236.14, and since it went into effect, the San Diego Superior Court has granted 15 *vacatur* petitions, creating new life paths for human trafficking survivors.

“Having a criminal record is a huge barrier for human trafficking survivors to move forward with their lives and get a fresh start,” said District Attorney Summer Stephan. “These survivors have trouble getting jobs, securing housing and completing their education which makes them a target for further exploitation. We want victims and survivors to know that we have created a trauma informed system in San Diego County working with the Public Defender and organizations like [Free To Thrive](#) to streamline their *vacatur* petitions and fairly and expeditiously handle them.”

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, online predators have unprecedented access to kids through everyday scrolling on new apps, social media, online gaming and distance learning. With so much dependence on technology and the web, children are increasingly at risk of befriending strangers online.

“Due to COVID-19 causing our children to attend school virtually and engage socially online, it is more important than ever for parents to vigilantly review their children’s computer and cellular phone activities,” said Sergeant Garrick Nugent from ICAC. “To a child or teenager, connecting with someone through social networks, games, or messaging becomes as real as any other relationship, even though they have never met in person – to the point they call the online persona their boyfriend, girlfriend or best friend. Parents need to realize how important this relationship is to their child and must take steps to both understand this and stay involved in their child’s internet activity, including texting, messaging apps, games and social networks.”

Based on the investigative work conducted by the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force, traffickers are commonly using various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, to locate, communicate and recruit potential victims of human trafficking.

“Most of the time, traffickers will create a profile that depicts a life of luxury,” said Commander Geanie Franco of the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force. “They will have pictures of themselves with large amounts of cash, jewelry, and other high valued merchandise. Traffickers will then target vulnerable victims, typically by direct message, and begin to recruit them by promising to better their life by increasing their social economic standing and/or build a meaningful intimate relationship with them. Once the trafficker gains the trust of the potential victim, they will then turn that trust against them and exploit them for the trafficker’s own financial gain. Occasionally, traffickers will ask potential victims to send them sexually explicit photos of themselves through social media for the trafficker to use to post online prostitution advertisements.”

Red flags and behavior by children that parents should be taken seriously include:

- Secretive behavior with online activities.
- Hiding what is on their computer screens.
- Out of sight or behind a closed door when online.
- Vague talk of making new friends with little to no details.
- Agitated behavior when answering their phone or needing to take calls in private.

- Sneaking out of the house or being untruthful about who they are with and where they have been.
- Attempting to look older with clothing or makeup.
- Unexplained expensive gifts, money or clothing.

What can parents and guardians do to keep their children safe?

- Review and approve games and apps before they are downloaded.
- Make sure privacy settings are set to the strictest level possible for online gaming systems, phones and other devices.
- Monitor your child’s use of the Internet and keep computers in a non-private room.
- Explain that images posted online most likely will remain on the internet permanently. You’re in control before you press “send” – but once you press send, you’re not.
- Teach your child about personal boundaries and awareness of their surroundings.
- Encourage open child-parent communication around Internet safety. Encourage them to tell a trusted adult if something does not feel right.

To report an online exploitation type crime against an unknown child, contact the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#). To report a crime against your child, involving the internet or other electronic means, please contact your [local law enforcement agency](#). If you have questions about Internet Crimes Against Children, prevention or suspicions, please contact the SDICAC Task Force at **858-715-7100**. If you suspect human trafficking, you can contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888) 373-7888 or text “HELP” or “INFO” to BEFREE (233733).

If you or someone you know is a survivor of human trafficking and would like help clearing their record of non-violent crimes related to their exploitation, you can contact [Free To Thrive](#) at (619) 693-6391 or the [Public Defender’s Office Fresh Start Program](#) via email at Fresh.Start@sdcounty.ca.gov.

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About the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office

The San Diego County DA’s Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.