

# Craigslist to drop 'erotic services' classifieds

May 13 2009, By DON BABWIN , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- A month after the killing of a masseuse who advertised on Craigslist, the classified ad site announced plans Wednesday to eliminate its "erotic services" category and screen all submissions to a new "adult services" section before they are posted.

Law enforcement officials praised the move as a victory against online prostitution, but they acknowledged doubts about whether the changes will curb the practice.

"I'm not going to take their word for it. We want to see action," said Dan Gallagher, an attorney representing Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who sued Craigslist in March, accusing it of being the nation's biggest source of prostitution.

The announcement marked a significant policy change for Craigslist, which in the past has never pre-screened ads, choosing instead to remove them only after receiving complaints. The new adult services ads will also carry a fee.

Skeptical authorities said the Web site had broken previous promises to monitor erotic ads.

New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo had even harsher words, saying that Wednesday's announcement came only after his office informed Craigslist a criminal probe had implicated the site.

"Rather than work with this office to prevent further abuses, in the

middle of the night, Craigslist took unilateral action which we suspect will prove to be half-baked," he said in a statement.

Craigslist did little to address those concerns. The Web site refused to comment beyond a prepared statement and left unanswered a host of questions about how the site could possibly screen all the ads.

"It doesn't guarantee that such activity will not pop up elsewhere, and it doesn't guarantee that it won't pop up elsewhere using highly coded words," said Steve Jones, a communications professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Jones said it will not be long before someone fills the void left by Craigslist's "erotic services" section.

"By now someone has probably registered the domain name 'Craigslisteroticservices.com,'" Jones said.

Although authorities had expressed concern about the ads in the past, the Web site came under closer scrutiny last month after a Boston-area man was accused of fatally shooting a woman who placed an ad on Craigslist.

Police believe 22-year-old Philip Markoff may have been involved in other crimes against women who also posted ads on Craigslist. Some reports have suggested he was robbing victims to pay gambling debts.

Craigslist officials and attorneys general from Illinois, Connecticut and Missouri met last week to seek an end to the ads. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan said the group told Craigslist that authorities' own checks had revealed the service was not monitoring the site as it had promised last year.

After receiving complaints about nude photographs, Connecticut

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal brokered an agreement with the site in November to crack down on prostitution ads.

The erotic services ads currently posted will expire in seven days. The new "adult services" section was already up on Wednesday.

Law enforcement promised to keep a close eye on Craigslist as it implemented the changes. Madigan said there was a risk that the reforms could just drive prostitution to other platforms, but she insisted authorities will monitor those sites, too.

One major question stemmed from Craigslist's vow only to monitor the new "adult services" category and not other areas people may try to place solicitation ads, such as under the personals ads.

Gallagher also wondered why Craigslist agreed to monitor the site after making previous statements that doing so would be too expensive.

New postings in the "adult services" category will cost \$10, but once a posting is approved, customers will be eligible for reposting at \$5.

Dart, the Cook County sheriff, said the action by Craigslist "is what happens frequently when all of a sudden people are looking at a court date." The announcement came on the same day prosecutors and a Craigslist attorney appeared in federal court.

Jim Buckmaster, Craigslist's CEO, said the agreement preserves a place "for legal businesses to advertise" while incorporating suggestions from law enforcement, free speech advocates and Internet law experts.

Dart said his lawsuit will stay on file until he sees changes online.

"If we see what we'd ask for ... we will dismiss our lawsuit," Dart said.

Craigslist agreed to take action despite its contention that it has been unfairly singled out by what Buckmaster called "sensationalistic journalism."

"The record is clear that use of Craigslist classifieds is associated with far lower rates of violent crime than print classifieds, let alone rates of violent crime pertaining to American society as a whole," he said.

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Associated Press writers Tammy Webber and Deanna Bellandi contributed to this report from Chicago.

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