

U.S. Attorney's Report to the District

Supporting Safe Childhoods

One primary mission of the U.S. Attorney's Office is to protect our communities, including children and other vulnerable individuals. As schools transitioned to remote learning in early 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal law enforcement identified a significant and concerning increase in online child enticement and sexual exploitation activity. According to some data collected, attempts at child exploitation increased by 50 to 100% year-over-year as school-aged children spent much more time online, often without adult supervision. Students also lost out on contact with adults outside the home—like teachers, doctors, social workers, dentists, and other professionals—who had played a large role in detecting child abuse and sexual exploitation before the pandemic.

In response to these challenges, our office and our partners developed trainings and outreach programs for families, schools, and law enforcement to help prevent and detect child exploitation in this new environment.

One of the key components of this effort was our outreach program for education professionals, "Protecting Students During the COVID-19 Crisis: Recognizing and Responding to Child Abuse and Sexual Exploitation." This program was designed to help educators, administrators, and other school staff adjust to the virtual classroom through interactive training. It covered multiple types of child abuse and sexual exploitation for which students are at risk, including physical abuse in the home, trafficking, online exploitation, and even incidents that may occur in the virtual classroom itself. The training taught techniques that educators can use during remote instruction to detect warning signs of abuse and exploitation and to encourage students to confide in them about any threats to their safety. It also addressed measures that educators can take to protect their students' privacy, by securing both their online classrooms and their personal digital footprint. Participants were also given additional resources to help in their efforts to educate the teachers, administrators, parents, and guardians in their districts. Through this effort, prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney's Office, joined by a Special Agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, reached top leaders, curriculum designers, and IT professionals from over 90% of the approximately 1,100 school districts in California.

Our office also reached out directly to parents and students themselves with a virtual presentation titled, "Internet Crimes Against Children and Online Safety: Is Your Child Safe Online?" This presentation, designed for students in middle school and high school and their parents and guardians, addressed the range of threats that children face online, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation addressed topics including online predators, sexting, and social media safety, and a prosecutor from the U.S. Attorney's Office discussed cases that have been prosecuted in our region to

provide real-life examples of the dangers students can encounter. The presenters also shared tools for protecting students' safety and privacy online.

In addition to this outreach to schools and families, our office also worked with local law enforcement to ensure that we are working together as effectively as possible to combat crimes against children. Prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney's Office developed a seminar series for our partners in local law enforcement, focusing on inter-agency coordination to prosecute child exploitation offenses and best practices for cybercrime investigations. This training, which totaled six hours of instruction over three sessions, fostered closer relationships between federal and local law enforcement and increased our district's capacity for prosecuting crimes against children during and after the pandemic.

All these outreach and training efforts fit well with the work we do investigating and prosecuting criminal cases under Project Safe Childhood, the Department of Justice's nationwide initiative to combat child exploitation and abuse. They also complement our office's broader outreach to the schools in our communities, including our attorneys' participation in Operation Protect and Defend to teach civics in high school classrooms across the district in Sacramento, Fresno, and Bakersfield area schools; mentoring of students at an underserved local high school; speaking about careers in law and law enforcement to schools with criminal justice academies; and—launched this fall—teaching local fifth graders in an underserved community about the law and the criminal justice system through Project LEAD. Every child deserves to have a safe childhood, and our office works hard in many different ways to further that goal.

If you would like to communicate with our office, please contact the main number in Sacramento, or submit a suggestion by clicking on the button below. Thank you.

Acting United States Attorney

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