Cops send warning to would-be online Johns

By: Paul Srubas

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BELLEVUE — Here’s a greeting card you don’t want to get.

It’s being sent electronically to people in Brown County who have been trying to buy sex over the internet.

Soliciting prostitution is a crime, it harms victims and puts the would-be buyer at risk of fraud, theft or assault, the note warns.

It also means the Brown County Sheriff’s Office probably knows who you are and definitely knows how to reach you and what you’ve been doing in your spare time on your computer that you might not want your spouse, family or neighbors to know about.

“We are committed to stopping demand for human trafficking,” Chief Deputy Todd DeLain of the sheriff’s office said Friday.

The sheriff’s office sent out 409 of those notifications last week. They went to people who responded to ads that undercover investigators placed in underground websites that cater to prostitution. If the responder actually set up a meeting with the supposed prostitute, it would have resulted in an arrest, but many responders go no further than establishing a line of communication with the person they believe is a prostitute, and those were the ones targeted with the notice, DeLain said.

“A meeting doesn’t have to occur for them to be charged,” said Sgt. Matt Wilson of the sheriff’s office. “However, with 409 people making contact, that’s a lot of time for us to spend following up. We’ll go back and review them (but)… People interested in going down that path, hopefully this warning letter deters them from wanting to go down that path further.”

Sending out the notification is one of Brown County’s contributions to the national Johns Suppression Initiative, an effort to combat prostitution and human trafficking by attacking the buyers, rather than the sellers, of the services.

The national effort made a push from July 25 to Aug. 26 that netted 473 would-be sex-buyers around the country, DeLain said.

Don’t think that Brown County stops at issuing warning letters, though. The sheriff’s office, along with Green Bay, De Pere and Ashwaubenon, also contributed 19 arrests in the period, DeLain said. Those 19 were charged in Brown County with trying to buy sex, he said.

In addition, Brown County officers arrested a Michigan man, Earl Thompson III, 34, of Flint, Mich., for receiving compensation for human trafficking. Thompson was offering up the services of a Flint teenager for sex and came to Green Bay because profits here are higher than they’d be in Flint, DeLain said. Thompson is awaiting a Sept. 14 status conference in Brown County Circuit Court.

Deputies also arrested Donald C. Bertrand, 43, of Green Bay, and Samuel A. Moderson, 22, of Appleton, for using computers to solicit child sex and intimate photos, DeLain said. Those two are facing charges in Brown County Circuit Court.

And Brian D. Wickersham, 58, of Merrill, was arrested for trying to solicit a juvenile male for sex. Wickersham was charged in Brown County Circuit Court but will be indicted in federal court for the offense, DeLain said.