

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

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**CITY COUNCIL HYBRID VIRTUAL/IN-PERSON LUNCH AND LEARN MEETING**

**ONLINE PREDATORS AND CHILD INTERNET SAFETY**

**Meeting Minutes**

 **March 23, 2021**

**11:30 a.m.**

**Location:** Hybrid in-person (Lynwood Roberts Room) and virtual (via Zoom platform) meeting

**In attendance:** Council Members LeAnna Cumber, Rory Diamond, Reggie Gaffney, Michael Boylan, Ron Salem, Randy White, Joyce Morgan (via Zoom)

**Also**: Jeff Clements and Yvonne Mitchell – Council Research Division; Eric Grantham and Steve Cassada – Council Staff Services; Cheryl Brown – Council Secretary/Director; Sgt. Katie Adams, Lt. R.A. Lestrange – Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office; Amanda Videll, CJ Goodman – FBI Jacksonville Field Office; Tony Algozzini, Kirby Wedekind – Department of Homeland Security

**Meeting Convened**: 11:45 a.m.

Council Member Cumber opened the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance and their interest in this important topic. It takes the whole community (parents, law enforcement, and everyone else) to keep children safe when they’re using the internet because of the prevalence of threats.

Sgt. Katie Adams introduced herself as the head of JSOs internet crimes against children unit (7 officers). She pointed to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC, in Alexandria, VA), as the preeminent agency responsible for finding missing children and promoting internet safety for youth (through its KidSmartz and NetSmartz programs). Children are constantly on the internet today for schoolwork and recreation, so opportunities for danger are abundant. She recommended taking the fundamental step of asking your children lots of questions – what are your favorite apps? What sites are you visiting? There are risks to all children at all ages so parents and guardians need to be alert. Should a parent suspect something is amiss, it’s important not to frighten or threaten the child by overreacting; stay calm and talk it out. Always encourage open communication. Set and keep frim rules about what kind of internet access and apps are and are not allowed, what kind of personal information may be posted and what may not. Children should be cautioned to never share their current location, home address or passwords. Cyberbullying can be very problematic because of the speed and extent to which it spreads via electronic media. Security apps are a good idea, but parents must still be vigilant – threats change on a weekly or daily basis and security apps work differently on different devices. Bad actors are always evolving ways to evade the latest security precautions. The COVID pandemic led to a surge in incidents and complaints because children were on the computer so much more than usual.

Council Member Boylan said that, in addition to the criminal exploitation being discussed today, he is also concerned about commercial exploitation of children – advertisers constantly trying to sell them things as long as they are online and subject to advertising bombardment.

Agent C.J. Goodman of the FBI’s Violent Crimes Against Children Squad talked about the wide variety of threats to young people via the internet and reviewed some recent cases leading to convictions and long-term prison sentences in the North Florida area. The internet is a great thing, but can be used for bad purposes, especially with the continual development of new technologies that mask the true identity of perpetrators and allow them to assume many attractive personas. Child sexploitation and sextortion can happen to anyone with internet access. The most important thing that parents can do to protect their children is to talk and talk some more with them about what they’re doing and with whom they are doing it. Constant vigilance is the key.

Tony Algozzini with Department of Homeland Security recited some national statistics about the extent of internet and cellphone use by young people. He said that a huge misconception among the general public is that child pornography or child sexual abuse is all about teenagers - it is not, affecting much younger children now. Regular communication within the family is vital; there have to be rules that are firmly enforced. NCMEC produces educational material aimed at every age group. Parents and guardians should start the talking early. Don’t wait “until they’re ready”, the need to know the facts now. Every school district has or should be dealing with this issue, including having students take safety courses and sign computer safety pledges before being issued school-owned computers.

Council Member Cumber thanked the law enforcement officers for their dedication to a very difficult task and a very sensitive subject. Mr. Goodman said the current day and age is very different than how children were raised 20 or 30 or more years ago when there was no internet. We need to prepare children adequately for the world they live in now and in the future. Ms. Cumber said her family rule is no use of apps that don’t have parental controls. Parents must be vigilant about finding and setting appropriate control levels on their children’s devices.

Council Member Diamond asked what City Council could do via legislation to help the situation, within the constraints and state and federal law. Mr. Goodman said it would be helpful if law enforcement could be more proactive and not have to have a child be victimized before law enforcement can get involved. There is a broader need for society to develop a norm that this kind of behavior is unacceptable. Sgt. Adams said that technology now exists to easily alter photographs to superimpose people’s faces on other people’s bodies – maybe that practice could be a penalty enhancer when someone is tried for these kinds of online offenses. It would help if law enforcement could put informational flyers and other information in public places (Tax Collector Offices, libraries, etc.) to get the word out to the public. Mr. Cumber said Congress is working on legislation that wouldn’t allow exploiters to hide behind internet service provider anonymity policies. Council Member Boylan suggested getting the word out to grandparents, many of whom provide child care to their grandchildren on a regular basis. In response to a question from Council Member White about whether females commit sexploitation, Sgt. Adams said they do, and it’s increasing.

Council Member Salem said the City got a $100,000 grant for an anti-vaping program from a concerned citizen, which the City matched, to do an educational program in the schools. He suggested the same could be done on this issue. Sgt. Adams said she’s talked to the School Board Police Department and they don’t have a district-wide program on internet safety, but do things on a school-by-school basis upon a principal’s request. Mr. Salem asked how reporting to NCMEC works and if that gets information to local law enforcement agencies. Sgt. Adams said it does get routed down to local law enforcement, and they also get reports via CrimeStoppers and calls directly to the JSO. Mr. Salem said he wants to explore doing something with the school system about a uniform educational program.

Council Member Cumber said Council Members can help get the word out about the seriousness of this problem and encourage parents to realize the dangers of the modern world and deal with it. Council Member Morgan said she is willing to explore this issue with the many non-profits in her district with whom she’s already working. Ms. Cumber will call a noticed meeting to get ideas from all council members about what they think needs to be done.

Public Comment

Stanley Scott agreed with Council Member Salem’s comments about reaching out directly to children about the dangers they face. He suggested developing a mascot to promote internet safety like Smokey Bear did with fire safety in a previous generation.

Ms. Cumber again thanked the panelists and the participating council members for their attendance and their efforts in this cause.

**Meeting adjourned:** 1:11 p.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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