



An Overview of Sending Letters To Homes of Sex Buyers in the United States

**Summary Based Upon
Research from the Study,
“A National Assessment
of Prostitution and Sex
Trafficking Demand
Reduction Efforts”**

**Supported by
National Institute of Justice
Grant # 2008-IJ-CX-0010**

January 7, 2012

Prepared for:
**The National Institute of
Justice**

Office of Justice Programs,
U.S. Department of Justice
810 Seventh Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20531

Prepared by:
Michael Shively, Ph.D.
Kristina Kliorys
Kristin Wheeler
Dana Hunt, Ph.D.

Abt Associates Inc.
55 Wheeler St.
Cambridge, MA 02138

An Overview of Using “Dear John Letters” in the United States

A tactic that has been employed in at least 40 U.S. sites is sending letters to the homes of known or suspected buyers of commercial sex. The intention is to make it more difficult for johns to engage in sexual exploitation anonymously, or at least, unbeknownst to spouses or partners. People we interviewed for the national assessment cite as the primary reasons for using this tactic: (1) to alert partners of buyers of commercial sex so that they can protect themselves from contracting infectious disease, given the higher probability that johns may be carriers, and (2) to bring pressure to bear from whomever lives with sex buyers to discourage them from that activity.

There are two main variants of this approach. The first is sending letters to the registered owners of cars seen “cruising” known prostitution strips for the apparent purpose of soliciting sex from prostituted persons. This tactic requires that police acquire the license plate number of the car that is being used in a way consistent with soliciting commercial sex. An example of suspicious behavior would be when a car circles a block repeatedly and then stops so the driver can talk with women who appear to be engaged in street prostitution, and/or have are familiar to police due to prior prostitution arrests. Police sometimes also observe people known to have been prostituted repeatedly entering cars that pull up the curb, and returning minutes later.

While the purpose of this interaction is apparent on a commonsense level, in most jurisdictions there would be insufficient evidence to arrest the suspected sex buyer for soliciting commercial sex, since there is reasonable doubt about what actually occurred between the two parties. In such circumstances, police in some jurisdictions will record the license number of the vehicle, and later find the address of a registered owner and send them a letter. Sometimes the observation is made not by the police, but instead by members of the community who observed this kind of activity and record the license plate numbers, and make a report to police departments. For example, police in Minneapolis, MN, Des Moines, IA, and Oakland, CA¹ have had residents record license plate numbers and descriptions of known or suspected johns and their vehicles, and forward the information to police so they can send letters to the alleged offenders (or the registered owners of vehicles appearing to be used by sex buyers). Some police departments have forms for recording the information, which asked members of the community to record the location of the event the time, make model and color of the vehicle, and most importantly, the plate number. Once police have been given this information, they can follow the same procedure as if they had made the observations themselves.

The letters typically strive to make it clear that police do not assume that the registered owner of the vehicle was necessarily driving the car when the suspicious behavior was observed. The letter does not constitute being charged with a crime. Some of the letters explicitly address the fact that the suspicious behavior may have occurred while someone other than the registered owner was driving. The tone may even be friendly, suggesting that the registered owner’s vehicle is being used improperly, and that they should take care not to allow others to use their vehicle for such purposes.

Another application of “dear john” letters is sending letters to the homes of arrestees. Such letters do not say that suspicious behavior occurred, but instead that an arrest of the addressee was made for

¹ <http://www.baycitizen.org/crime/story/dear-john-letters-new-tool-fight/>

prostitution. A list of “early adopters” of this tactic is presented in Table 1. A sample letter used by the Escambia County Sheriff’s Office is presented in Figure 1, and examples of English and Spanish versions of similar letters from Raleigh, NC are presented in the Demandforum website’s “Letters” tactic page.

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of “Dear John” Letters		
Year	City or County	State
1982	Aberdeen	MD
1982	Boston	MA
1982	Baltimore	MD
1982	Evansville	IN
1985	Portland	OR
1988	Allentown	PA
1988	Newark	NJ
1991	Gordon Heights	NY
1991	Wyandanch	NY
1993	South Bend	IN
1995	Brooklyn Park	MD
1997	Hollywood	FL
2000	High Point	NC
2005	Charlotte	NC
2006	Reading	PA

The use of “Dear John” letters has not been evaluated, so it is not known whether the approach is effective in deterring sex buyers. The use of these letters has also provoked objections similar to those in response to newspaper or website shaming: they can be argued to violate due process protections if they are assumed to constitute punishment, and the punishment is applied prior to conviction. The letters we have encountered are carefully crafted in an attempt to address these due process concerns, but the objections could be valid if the letters are not properly constructed.

References

References for the materials cited in this summary can be found in the bibliography of the National Assessment final report, and in each site’s webpage at DemandForum.net.

Figure 1: Sample "Dear John" Letter, Escambia County Sheriff's Office

Sheriff



DAVID MORGAN

John Doe
276 Main Street
Pensacola, FL 32509

Vehicle: 1990 Toyota
Location of arrest: Arlington Ave & W Street
Date and Time of arrest: 2:15 am 7/1/09

Dear John ,

The vehicle registered in your name was involved in an arrest for violation(s) of Florida's laws prohibiting prostitution. Attached is a copy of the Florida Statute for your review. The individual arrested from your vehicle is _____. As vehicle owner, you should be aware of the Florida Contraband Forfeiture Act wherein motor vehicles can be seized if they are used in violation of this act. The Escambia County Sheriff's Office is notifying you so that you can consider these factors in deciding whether to allow others to drive your automobiles.

It is important for you to realize that the above named person and his/her significant other may have been exposed to a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD). Certain STDs, like HIV, are incurable and may not be noticeable for a long time. It is possible to be exposed to an STD even if your partner was with a prostitute only once. Getting tested is important to your health and may impact your future ability to have children. Confidential STD testing is available through your private doctor or the Escambia County Health Department (850-595-6532). Fees may be involved.

It is a common myth that prostitution is a "victimless crime" or that it is "an act between two consenting adults." Prostitution is a crime which is linked to drugs (use and sale), acts of violence toward prostitutes and their customers and in the worst cases, human trafficking in juveniles for the sex trade. In addition to STD's, other viruses can spread through intimate contact with random individuals whom you may not know. Hepatitis, HIC and HPV can all be unknowingly transmitted and can lead to serious, and fatal, illness.

Prostitution, soliciting for prostitution and the other activities described in the attached statute (F.S.S. 796.07) will not be tolerated in Escambia County. If you think you may have been exposed to any communicable diseases after reading the contents of this letter, please contact your health care provider or the Escambia County Health Department for evaluation before having intimate contact with other people to help prevent the spreading of serious conditions.

Sincerely,


David Morgan
Sheriff, Escambia County

ESCAMBIA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Telephone (850) 436-9512 • www.escambiaso.com • P.O. Box 18770 • Pensacola, Florida 32523