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### **MONTGOMERY COUNTY SHINING LIGHT ON DANGERS OF PROSTITUTION TO BOTH THE BUYERS AND SELLERS OF SEX THROUGH STINGS; *Working to find additional ways to thwart the commercial sex trade***

NORRISTOWN, Pa. (Dec. 6, 2019) — Montgomery County District Attorney Kevin R. Steele, Montgomery Township Police Chief J. Scott Bendig and Horsham Township Police Chief William Daly announced the results of a concerted effort to stop the buying and selling of sex in Montgomery County through two planned law enforcement undercover operations that led to the arrests of nine men in the last month for attempting to patronize women they thought were prostitutes.

The undercover operations are designed to do two things: decrease demand for pay-for-sex and spotlight the dangers involved in the commercial sex trade, more commonly called prostitution. "People often think that prostitution is a victimless crime," said Steele. "But that is simply not true."

There are negative consequences and legal issues for both the men and women involved in the sex trade equation as well as for the community at large. While there are not many quantifiable numbers related to prostitution and its prevalence, law enforcement does see increased crime in areas where the commercial sex trade is active. "Both men and women involved in sex-for-hire are at risk of being assaulted, robbed or subjected to other forms of violence and crimes, as well as experiencing health consequences from the behavior, such as an increased risk of disease," said Steele. "None of this activity is good for the individuals involved or for the surrounding community."

The nine men recently arrested in the organized operations that targeted the commercial sex trade in the Montgomery Township and Horsham Township areas were from throughout Montgomery, Bucks and Philadelphia counties and ranged in age from 35 to 59 years old. DA Steele declined to name the men, as has been done in that past, saying that the point of the operation is not to publicly shame buyers or sellers of sex but to highlight the dangers of engaging in the sex trade and to deter future buyers of sex. An even more troubling aspect of the commercial sex trade is the exploitation and trafficking by men of both adult women and children, especially children who are in foster care or are runaways.

“By highlighting the fact that men are arrested for buying sex from a sex worker and then have to answer charges of Patronizing a Prostitute within the criminal justice system, we are trying to discourage and decrease the demand side of the prostitution equation as well as spotlight the issue of human trafficking,” said Steele. “If there was no one willing to pay for sex, we would not have this problem in Montgomery County or anywhere else.”

For the operation, detectives placed online advertisements offering prostitution services. Hundreds of men responded to the ad via text messages or phone calls, which were answered by undercover detectives from the Montgomery County Detective Bureau (MCDB), Montgomery Township Police Department and Horsham Township Police Department. Each of the defendants texted or called the number, arranged a time and location for a meeting and finalized a price for sexual services. When the men showed up at the agreed upon location, they were arrested and charged with Patronizing a Prostitute, a third-degree misdemeanor. They will each have a preliminary hearing on the charges, then proceed through the criminal justice system.

Additional undercover operations targeting the commercial sex trade have been executed previously in King of Prussia and other areas of Montgomery County. The areas targeted for undercover operations are chosen based on the calls to police as well as the number of ads offering sex for sale on online sites. The sting operations are part of the efforts being made by the District Attorney’s Office and local law enforcement to deter the sex trade and sex trafficking. MCDB detectives, local police and prosecutors are part of a multi-agency group that is looking at both traditional and out-of-the-box methods, beyond buyer stings, to deter the commercial sex trade in Montgomery County. “I’m hopeful we can find some new methods to address the dangers of the commercial sex trade through this working group,” said Steele.

The criminal cases against the nine men will be prosecuted by Assistant District Attorneys in the Family Protection Unit, which handles cases involving sex crimes, domestic violence, elder abuse and animal abuse as well as other criminal offenses.

Approved for release:

Kevin R. Steele