

'Safe text' a sign of times

United Way sponsors billboards urging teens not to send nude photos via phones

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To help thwart the widespread practice of teenagers sending nude photos of themselves over mobile devices, the United Way of Greater Milwaukee is unveiling a new bus stop billboard Thursday: an edgy illustration of a giant cell phone with a condom on it.

"Please practice safe text," says the latex-encased phone's screen.

The image, followed by the message "Protect yourself. And your reputation. Never send nude photos to anyone," was set to be plastered on dozens of bus stop shelters near high schools, starting Wednesday night.

Betsy Rourke, spokeswoman for the United Way of Greater Milwaukee, said that although the ad might be considered controversial, organization leaders felt

strongly that they had to take a bold step to catch teens' attention.

If successful, the advertisement may be adapted for a national awareness campaign, Rourke said.

"Teens don't have any sense of immediate consequences," she added.

The youthful practice of sending revealing photos of oneself over a mobile device — dubbed "sexting" — recently drew headlines in the Milwaukee area.

Last month, a group of Waukesha West High School students was investigated for spreading a photo of a naked 14-year-old peer to hundreds of other students' cell phones.

Possession of child pornography charges, intended for adults, also apply to juveniles who are in custody of such mate-

rial, area police have said.

Another case, in which male students at New Berlin Eisenhower High School sent nude photos of themselves over Facebook to a boy in the New Berlin School District, who was posing as a girl, also unsettled parents.

The issue drove many to seek resources on Internet safety and how to protect — and monitor — their kids in a world characterized by instant technology.

Rourke said the anti-sexting campaign is a way to zero in on an issue United Way leaders thought could be contributing to the city's high teen pregnancy rates. The organization fast-tracked the ad when local events drew attention to the issue.

The United Way has been working for several years to lower the city's teen pregnancy rate by a goal of 46%.