

## Lawmakers focus on combating human trafficking

By ALISSA SKELTON, Associated Press

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LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska lawmakers are clamping down on human trafficking and prostitution this year, with new bills that seek to punish johns while protecting prostitutes from criminal prosecution.

Sens. Amanda McGill of Lincoln and Mark Christensen of Imperial have their eyes set on tackling what they say is an issue swept under the rug.

McGill introduced bills this week that would prevent minors from being prosecuted for prostitution and would post the names of convicted johns on a public website for six months. Christensen introduced legislation to regulate escort services and redefine massages, since many prostitution rings operate as spas.

Both senators support each other's bills and worked together last year to develop a human trafficking task force made up of law enforcement, researchers and activists. The group has been researching, educating law enforcement and raising awareness about the issue. Since the task force has succeeded so far, McGill says she and Christensen are shifting their focus to creating laws. Next year, McGill hopes to create services for women who are victims of the sex trade.

"We are trying to give police the tools to arrest the people who are really at fault," Christensen said.

Christensen has been pushing for years to regulate escort services and their employees in an effort to prevent human trafficking and prostitution.

Nebraska Family Council executive director and human trafficking task force member Al Riskowski worked with Christensen to craft the legislation that would require escort agencies and their employees to obtain and carry permits to operate. Current law doesn't require escorts to carry permits to work for an agency.

Christensen's bill would also add restrictions to what an escort is allowed to do with a customer. The escort and customers would not be allowed to be nude, touch or engage in sexual acts. The bill also would make it illegal for people under 18 years old to use an escort service.

Christensen has introduced similar bills during past sessions, but the legislation stalled in committee. Christensen said he thinks the legislation hasn't moved to a vote because some legislators thought Christensen was trying to legalize prostitution by providing escort services with permits. Even McGill was skeptical at first, she said.

But really, requiring permits would chip away at the escort services industry because lawmakers would be able to identify escort managers and the escorts, Christensen said.

McGill said she talked to a former escort service owner who said the proposed legislation would "destroy the industry."

"I've realized how significant this problem is and how women are actually human trafficking victims," she said. "It's now my mission to explain that to more people."

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