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News



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Updated: Laws, pending bills aim to cut down on prostitution at PA massage parlors

U.S. Dept. of State report details horrific accounts of forced prostitution

By Stacy Brown | PA Independent

HARRISBURG — At 16, **Ming** left her home in **Southeast Asia** on a student visa with the promise of a great education and a job, which she eventually could use to send for her mother and eight siblings.

Ming settled in **northeast Pennsylvania**, where her visa was confiscated by the men who brought her there. She was forced to live in a 12-foot-by- 12-foot room furnished with eight cots for the number of women with whom she shared the space.

Like the other women, Ming's job was to provide what the storefront called "Heavenly massages" for about

\$40 a rub.

To her horror, no school existed and the back rubs were simply an appetizer on a sinister menu that included illicit sex at a cost of up to \$100 for each of the up to 10 men she'd service daily.

Allisa, 16, of **Honduras**, experienced a similar fate as did **Maira**, 15, of the **Dominican Republic**.

This account, provided by the **U.S. Department of State**, is one among thousands.

Grim reality

The United States is a destination country for men, women and children subjected to forced labor, debt bondage, document servitude and sex trafficking, according to the State Department, which annually releases a report on human trafficking.

Debt bondage is when a person pledges him or herself against a loan, while document servitude is defined by the U.S. government as obtaining immigrant visas for someone to enter into the country and then retaining possession of that person's immigration documents until a debt is paid.

Each of those acts usually are used as leverage in forcing people into prostitution, officials said.

[The 2011 report](#) contained a gripping, but very real and grim, account of a visit to a victim's shelter by U.S. Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#).

"I was embraced by children who should have been in grade school, but were instead recovering from having been enslaved in a brothel," Clinton said, of her visit to a Cambodian shelter last year.

"There was one little girl who had the biggest grin on her face, and then when I looked into that face, I saw that one of her eyes was badly disfigured. She had glasses on. And I asked one of the women running the shelter, 'What happened to her?'

"And she said, 'Well, when she was sold into a brothel, she was even younger than she is now, and she basically fought back to protect herself against what was expected. So the brothel owner stabbed her in the eye with a large nail.'"

Trafficking occurs for commercial sexual exploitation in street prostitution, brothels and massage parlors, the department's report said. Violence, like that perpetrated upon the young girl Clinton visited, is common.

Trafficking offenses are investigated by federal law enforcement agencies and prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice. The federal government tracks its activities by fiscal year, which runs from Oct. 1 through Sept. 30. In fiscal 2010, federal law enforcement charged 181 individuals, and obtained 141 convictions in 103 human trafficking prosecutions, according to the State Department. This represents the largest number of federal human trafficking prosecutions initiated in a single year, officials said.

Trafficking sign

Locally, bipartisan state House and Senate proposals, [House Bill 235](#) and [Senate Bill 338](#), would require rest-

stops, bars, motels, welcome areas, strip clubs, massage parlors and other businesses to post an 8 ½-inch-by-11-inch sign with a 28-point font size that reads:

"If you or someone you know is being forced to engage in any activity and cannot leave — whether it is commercial sex, housework, farm work or any other activity — call the National Human Trafficking Hotline."

The number is 1-888-373-7888.

Lawmakers want these proposals to put a dent in local prostitution, which is prominent at local massage parlors, said state [Rep. Paul Clymer](#), R-Bucks, who is sponsoring HB 235.

"We need to curtail this horrific crime that destroys lives. People, who own and operate massage parlors or spas that are running these illegal practices as well as other businesses, should be put on notice," Clymer said.

State [Sen. Daylin Leach](#), D-Montgomery, who is sponsoring SB 338, added, "There is a great reluctance to report these kinds of crimes." Leach said victims are often too afraid, because they either have faced brutality from their captors or fear they would. Residents are reluctant to report suspicions, because far too many view most prostitution as a victimless crime, he said.

License required

More than 900 individuals are licensed to give massages in the Keystone state, according to the **Pennsylvania Department of State**. Businesses are not licensed, only individuals, department spokesman **Ronald Ruman** said.

Based on a new law that was enacted in January, applicants must have graduated from a massage therapy school or have five years of experience. A licensed individual or an accredited institution may provide documentation of a person's experience.

There was no data regarding illegal massage parlors, Ruman said.

Forfeiture of the license could occur, if it is found that massage therapists also are selling sex. Complaints are referred to local law enforcement for review with penalties of up to \$10,000 per illegal sex act, Ruman said.

Putting on a front

Concerns have been growing about human trafficking and the use of massage parlors as brothel fronts, Clymer said.

Several high-profile incidents were reported in the past 12 months in which police raided massage parlors and found them to be prostitution dens in the region:

- In May [a dozen people were arrested on prostitution and other charges after federal agents raided two Monroe County massage parlors.](#)
- In July, federal authorities raided a house in Baltimore with the name "Elite Spa" scrawled on it. The house was [a brothel that fronted as an Asian massage parlor.](#)

- In May, authorities raided a house in Overlea, Md., that was part of a wider investigation into prostitution in Pennsylvania, according to the Baltimore Sun.
- Raids on massage parlors being used as prostitution houses also took place earlier this year in Philadelphia, Lackawanna and Luzerne counties.

Those who are forced into prostitution at massage parlors usually live there and are made to have sex with up to 10 men each day, said **James Dold**, policy counsel for **Polaris Project**, a national organization based in Washington, D.C., that combats human trafficking.

The massage parlors usually are in strip malls, off-site office buildings and even hotels and residential homes, and the victims are often Asian women, Dold said.

"There are countless human trafficking victims across Pennsylvania who don't know where to turn. This critical legislation will help us reach more victims and educate the entire community about how to fight this brutal crime," Dold said.

"If residents have a question about something they see at a massage parlor, they should call the hotline," said **Krista Hoffman**, the criminal justice training specialist for the **Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape**, which works with local law enforcement to help eliminate sexual violence and advocates for the rights and needs of victims of sexual assault.

"If you notice a massage parlor open at 2 a.m., or you notice that employees never leave and that the clientele is just men, it's usually a tell-tale sign that something is wrong," Hoffman said.

Still, there are opponents of the bills as well as other laws against the sex trade.

"You think sex workers want to be rescued and taught how to sew so that they can become trafficked victims into sweatshops, making clothes for politically correct Americans who think they are doing a good thing by forcing sex workers out of their jobs and into a life of drudgery in a clothing manufacturing factory?" said **Norma Jean Almodovar**, executive director of the **Los Angeles chapter of COYOTE**, which advocates for the right of prostitutes.

COYOTE stands for Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics.

While Almodovar said she is against any business that forces labor upon individuals, she said she believes much of what is reported by police and in the media about human trafficking is government contrived rhetoric.

"Prostitution is a job and women who do this work have a right to remain in their job if that is what they choose," she said.

This story was updated to correct the size of the sign that would be required to be posted under SB 338. Update was made at 8:46 p.m. on 12/2/11

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