

Rhode Island struggles with legal, moral aspects of human trafficking

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Human trafficking and prostitution are common in Rhode Island, and of growing concern to law enforcement officials and legislators, according to several who spoke about the situation with the Rhode Island Catholic, newspaper of the Providence Diocese.

Providence, the capital - and many other cities and towns - are host to dozens of "massage parlors" and "spas."

Many residents are not even aware that while street prostitution is illegal in Rhode Island the selling of sex is legal behind closed doors. And in several of these parlors, women from Asian and Latin American countries are literally enslaved and coerced into performing sexual acts for a fee under the guise of working as masseuses.

Some parlors and spas have been raided many times by police. Often, the women found in these filthy brothels littered with mattresses and suitcases were South Korean immigrants.

State lawmakers have been at work advancing bills to ban human trafficking. In Washington, the Congressional Caucus on Human Trafficking hosted a June 20 forum on the topic.

A June 12 State Department report on human trafficking put 32 countries on a "watch list" for not complying fully with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, some nations for up to four years in a row.

"I saw the victims in the brothels," said state Rep. Joanne Giannini, recalling that many of the prostitutes were minors. "A lot of people think that it doesn't exist."

Giannini said when police have raided these facilities the women refused emergency social and medical services. "They are afraid of getting into trouble," she said.

As officials labor to shut down brothels that operate under the guise of "massage

parlors," they are baffled as to how they can effectively reach out to the victims.

According to Garry Bliss, director of policy and legislative affairs for Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline, efforts have been made to provide counseling and social services to the women, but they rejected them, fearing retribution from their captors - the owners of the establishments who reap big profits.

"They have never once taken us up on our offer," said Bliss.

He noted that when the massage parlors were raided in the past for code violations a crisis team, including a female Korean translator, visited the sites and met with the women individually, informing them of their rights and offering a safe place to stay. Only once did a worker leave the premises, after emergency medical personnel were called to transport the woman, who was seriously ill, to a local hospital.

"The raids have been especially depressing," Bliss observed. The women all looked unhealthy and malnourished. "All the joy and happiness has been taken away from them. All positive aspects of life have been drained out of them."

He believes most of the women to be in their 20s or 30s, and said some have probably been in this country for some time, being moved constantly from state to state. They are initially enslaved to pay off debts incurred in traveling to the United States. Often, they have come to this country assuming that they are to work as housekeepers or nannies.

"It's a hole that they can never dig themselves out of," Bliss said. "These women are not acting on their own free will."

A recent edition of a Providence alternative newspaper listed several advertisements for spas - a euphemism for brothels in many cases - some featuring "hot Asian girls."

"Sexual abuse and exploitation of persons for profit without regard for the well-being of the victims or community has a long history," said Donna M. Hughes, professor of women's studies at the University of Rhode Island, in testimony April 4 before the state House Judiciary Committee on three anti-trafficking bills.

“Laws to penalize those crimes have been on the books (for) years, even if they are not routinely used today,” Hughes said. “I believe we would not have a crisis in sex trafficking in Rhode Island or the U.S., if those old ‘anti-pimping’ laws had been enforced consistently for years.”

In a telephone interview, Hughes told the Rhode Island Catholic there are also countless young, vulnerable women in this country who are lured into the sex industry by predators who roam malls and video arcades and advertise in alternative newspapers.

“We see middle-class girls involved in trafficking,” she said, adding that their pimps often control them by creating emotional bonds and drug dependencies.

Women are not the only victims of human trafficking, Hughes added. Hearing-impaired men from Mexico have been found selling trinkets on the streets of New York City, while in other cases, men from Latin America have been forced to work as landscapers and at construction sites.

In the case of children who are victims of trafficking, Hughes deplored a common defense that the perpetrator was not aware that the victim was a minor. She said she favors provisions in new laws that allow for increased penalties for the severity of the crime, such as bodily harm to the victim, the length of time the perpetrator exploited the victim and the number of victims involved.