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Massage workers sometimes victims of human trafficking

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(Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

The employees at massage parlors offering illegal services are often victims of [human trafficking](#), according to law enforcement officials and human rights activists.

The women — many of whom are foreign-born — are often either paying off the cost of being brought to the United States or debts incurred by themselves or family members.

"It's modern-day slavery, in many cases," said Mary Murphy, a veteran detective specializing in sex crime investigations for the Rockland County District Attorney's Office.

Rockland District Attorney Thomas Zugibe agrees.

"The bottom line is, it's a very profitable business at the expense of these women who are not benefiting at all," he said. "The 'johns' are creating the market."

Related: [Town laws put pressure on massage parlors](#)

Women arrested in the parlors are usually charged with prostitution, a misdemeanor, and practicing a profession without a license, a felony. They are usually fined and placed on probation. The women are considered victims in most cases, so jail is not seriously considered, said Jennifer Parietti, lead sex crimes prosecutor for the Rockland District Attorney's Office.

Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based group working against modern slavery, suggests model ordinances for states to adopt to prevent human trafficking. Elizabeth Kim, a spokeswoman for the group, said model code is being updated but that action is encouraged on the local level as well.

Oftentimes employees live on site and their actions are monitored by managers or owners of the parlor, Kim said. Women, as well as men and transgender individuals, are often put in debt schemes in which their income is dependent on tips made by offering sexual acts to customers. Not all employees are victims of trafficking, she said.

"However, more often than not, we have seen how these spaces do facilitate human trafficking," she said. "Sometimes, it's hard for people to identify the signs of human trafficking and to be aware that a certain situation might be a human trafficking situation."

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