

<http://www.cbs6albany.com/news/features/top-story/stories/sheriff-prostitution-arrests-stem-human-trafficking-investigation-22464.shtml>

Sheriff: Prostitution arrests stem from human trafficking investigation

Updated: Friday, January 16 2015, 10:35 PM EST

COLONIE - Nine women and one man stood in front of a judge Friday afternoon in Albany County Court. With the help of an interpreter, all pled not guilty. Albany County Sheriff Craig Apple said the arrests come after his office performed an undercover operation on Thursday at four massage spas in Colonie. The Sheriff said the undercover operation is part of a larger human trafficking investigation.

The women, ranging in age from 24-55, are charged with prostitution and/or unauthorized practice of profession. The man, Chi Chick Cheng, 40, from Flushing is charged with promoting prostitution.

“Their position is they didn't commit the crimes they are charged with,” said Francisco Calderone, a defense attorney for some of the women. He said one of the women told him, she was just visiting and didn't work at the spa.

Most of the women are from New York City. The Sheriff said his office believes they are being brought to the Capital Region and are victims. CBS6 News has decided not to identify them.

“They are coming up here, being exploited,” said Sheriff Craig Apple. “And we can go back out today and get ten more.”

Sheriff Apple said the case started when his office received information that several Asian massage spas were operating in Colonie without proper licenses, and as a front for prostitution. He said investigators answered ads that had been placed on Backpage. When they entered the spas, the Sheriff said investigators were led into a private room where some of the women offered sexual encounters for more money. The Sheriff's Office said the businesses were on Central Avenue, Everett Road and New Loudon Road.

“The problem is a lot of people turning their heads saying, ‘I didn't know this was going on.’ Well I find it hard to believe that you didn't know this is going on in your facility. Some of the owners of these establishments were going to sit down with as well and get to the bottom of it,” said Sheriff Apple.

Sheriff Apple doesn't think Colonie is the only town in the Capital Region where his is happening. He said the investigation is not over.

“We plan on continuing this with the assistance of other agencies and shutting down as many as we can. But also we are trying to deter the people from going to and visiting these places,” said Sheriff Apple. “We are pretty sure we know who's behind it and we are going to get them, we are going to get to the bottom of it.”

In the meantime, the Sheriff said his office wants to help the women. If they are found to be victims, his office will work with the District Attorney to help them.

“We are encouraging some of these women to talk to us, that we can help,” he said.

Sheriff Apple said the purpose of the investigation was to identify potential victims of human trafficking and help them.

The Sheriff's Office said it is working with other agencies including the FBI.