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Minneapolis massage ordinance puts a dent in sex trafficking

Article by: ERIN GOLDEN, Star Tribune | Updated: February 28, 2015 - 3:50 PM

A licensing requirement shuts down businesses used as fronts.

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A new licensing requirement for Minneapolis massage businesses is helping authorities fight sex trafficking in the city — and has already led to the closure of a dozen unlicensed establishments.

The new rules, which were passed by the City Council in 2013, went into full effect in July. They require home businesses to pay an annual licensing fee of \$50 and larger massage businesses to pay \$140. The new rules also outline a variety of "unlawful acts" that could result in a citation or revoked license. The goal was to make it harder for prostitution rings and other illegal outfits to thrive under the guise of the massage business — an industry that in Minnesota does not require licensing by the state.

Officials say tightening up the rules for massage businesses has led to a dramatic reduction in the time it takes to stop illegal activity. In the past, a neighbor's tip concerning activity at a business would often leave officials with little room for recourse, short of a formal undercover investigation. Now, a notice from the city about licensing rules has been enough to get many businesses to shut down or move.

"It's really an efficient way of dealing with the illegal businesses and getting there before the victims of sex trafficking can be victimized," said Cmdr. Bruce Folkens, who heads up the Minneapolis Police Department division that investigates sex crimes.

Between March and December, a dozen businesses closed their doors. Three were cited for unlicensed activity: all three for "prohibited acts" and one for refusing to allow an inspection. Of the three, two are appealing their citations and a third paid the citation before closing.

Unlawful acts in the city's ordinance include the employment of workers under age 18, nudity and inappropriate fondling.

The closed businesses were located across the city, with most in Loring Park or south Minneapolis neighborhoods.

Linda Roberts, the city's assistant manager of licensing and consumer services, said the new rules also helped bring the massage business out of the unusual — and outdated — place it occupied in the city code. In the past, massage services were regulated only by the zoning code, which technically allowed them only downtown and

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linked them with adult entertainment businesses.

Roberts said Council Member Elizabeth Glidden, who led the effort for the new ordinance, worked with legitimate massage businesses to develop rules that would strengthen their position while making it easier to stomp out illegal activity.

"We took the time to meet with them and it was quite a diverse group of businesses, to make sure we were meeting their needs," she said.

Minneapolis' ordinance followed a handful of similar moves by other cities in the area. St. Paul has had massage licensing regulations for several years, but some suburban communities stepped up their regulations more recently.

Officials in [Apple Valley](#) and [Woodbury](#) said no businesses have been shut down or cited since their ordinances have gone into effect. In [Eden Prairie](#), officials are not yet enforcing the ordinance on the books, opting instead to tweak it to ensure it better protects legitimate businesses.

Jason Erickson, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American Massage Therapy Association, said many local industry professionals have been supportive of changes that lend legitimacy to their businesses. But he said some are concerned about communities that have imposed high licensing fees without consulting massage professionals about how best to identify fraud.

"A lot of the city ordinances that have been written and are on the books were written essentially by the police departments," he said. "And their concerns are not the same as those of massage therapists."

Other efforts tried

At a Friday community meeting on the topic of sex trafficking, Glidden told the audience that the city is trying to tackle the issue of sex trafficking — particularly among underage victims — from more angles. In addition to the massage ordinance, officials are working to train a variety of city staff members, including building inspectors, to spot and report activity that could involve prostitution or other crimes.

At the same meeting, a police official said last year the police department arrested about 20 men for running sex trade operations.

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