

What do I need to know as a consumer, massage therapist and advocate for legitimate massage services and businesses.

It is important to first clarify that reputable massage therapy businesses are referred to as Massage Establishments not “Massage Parlors”. Massage parlors, now referred to as Illicit Massage Businesses (IMB) are hidden in plain sight and appear to be legitimate business. The Polaris Project reports that there are an estimated 9,000 plus massage parlors or Illicit Massage Businesses (IBM) in every state in the country earning nearly 2.5 billion yearly. In addition, many IMB’s are part of an organized crime network that include illegal drugs, weapons and money laundering.

There is a misconception in the US that many illicit massage businesses are operated by women who choose to sell sex under the guise of the practice of massage therapy whereas, most women at IMB’s are victims of human trafficking.

As per the U.S. Department of Justice, trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

Victims are coerced by someone they meet online, who are close to them or even family members. Traffickers control victims with a variety of tactics that include physical harm, emotional brainwashing, abuse and isolation. Victims are threatened with deportation, arrest and shame to their families if they quit. Victims are mainly recruited outside of the US, are typically mothers in their mid-30’s to late 50’s and promised better income for their family. These women have no idea they are going to be sexually exploited and become trapped by the debt owed to the traffickers.

As per the Polaris Project*, “Force is rarely an element of massage parlor trafficking. Instead, victims are controlled by traffickers through a complex mixture of cultural manipulation, fraud, and coercion. Key among these are telling the women that the police are in the pockets of the traffickers and will simply arrest them, that the rest of society views the women as worthless, and that they have no real options but to stay at the massage parlor and do what the traffickers say.”

What can I look for as a consumer? What are the signs of IMB’s & Human Trafficking?
There are many national organizations and government entities such as the Polaris Project, deliverfund.org, and FBI that list possible indicators of IMB’s and human trafficking. Below are a few possible common indicators.

- Offer services at a lower price than the area market value and only accept cash
- Ask for cash or tips upfront and become agitated if large tip is not received
- Surveillance cameras located in uncommon places - including massage rooms
- Women will ask for a large tip or express distress if they do not receive a tip
- Advertise on illicit websites/advertise women dressed to suggest prurient interest
- Indicators that the women are living on the premises
- Have no intake paperwork for customers, falsifying intake forms to protect their clients
- Open 24 hours or advertise late night services
- Use a security buzzer to enter the business
- Speak very little to no English
- Windows completely covered so that the passersby cannot see into the business
- Advertise “New Girls”
- Employer may speak or answer question on behalf of the employees
- Employees unable to identify the business owner when asked
- No signs/posters advertising Fair Labor Standards, minimum wage or worker’s rights