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Federal Hill Protest Targets Landlords

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Federal Hill Protest Targets Landlords Who Rent to Brothels

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Landlords who rent space to spa-brothels were the target of a protest on Atwells Avenue on Federal Hill in Providence on the evening of March 28th.¹ About two dozen neighbors, friends, and anti-trafficking activists gathered to condemn landlords who rent to spa-brothels.

Over the past year, most of the discussion and debate about prostitution and human trafficking has focused on the women who perform the sex acts. There has been less attention paid to organized crime groups and individuals, including the landlords, who profit from the exploitation of women in prostitution and sex trafficking. Yet, in effect the landlords are the silent



partners with the criminals who run the operations, control the women and make the profits.

One of the protesters was Stacie, a massage therapist, who has had a massage business on the Hill for two years. She has been propositioned by men who come into her legitimate massage business asking for sex. Stacie said one time a “scummy looking man” came in and asked her to give him a shower. Another time, while giving a man a massage he asked her for a “grand finale,” indicating a sex act. She was so repulsed that she immediately stepped back from the table and refused to finish the massage.

Stacie’s clients joined the protest to show their support for her therapeutic massage business. Numerous cars honked in support of the protest as they drove by. The only opposing comment

¹ For more information about Fuji Spa see CAT Bulletin “Federal Hill Resident & Restaurateur Forced to Move Because of Spa-Brothel,” February 22, 2010, http://citizensagainsttrafficking.org/uploads/CAT_Federal_Hill_Resident-Restaurateur_Forced_to_Move3.pdf

came from a man who leaned out a doorway across the street and yelled a derogatory comment.

Steve O'Brien, the organizer of the protest and owner of the seasonal restaurant Federal Hill Wood Grilled Pizza which operated behind the spa-brothel, said that his pizza customers were unhappy that they could be observed by the brothel's surveillance system and that hurt his business. He previously rented an apartment in the same house, but had to move because of the activities of the brothel. His fiancée was solicited by men when she visited. O'Brien held a protest sign with the picture of Brett Lipeles, the owner of 417 Atwells Avenue

Other protesters included American and foreign students, anti-trafficking activists, and folks from local churches who have been long time opponents of human trafficking.

People at the protest talked about other spa-brothels in the Federal Hill neighborhood.

The Asian spa-brothels are part of organized crime networks. Previous federal trafficking cases have discovered that they are headquartered in Flushing, New York. Frequently, the phone numbers for the spa-brothels have New York area codes.



At the Fuji Spa, the site of the protest, the "open" sign has been cut out of the window, but neighbors report that the women are still there. The white Lexus with Colorado license plates



that transports the women is still seen in the parking lot (although it was not there at the time of the protest).

CAT has observed that several spa-brothels around Providence have taken down their "open" signs, but there are indications that they are still in operation, including advertisements in the adult

section of the *Providence Phoenix*. Likely, they are open to “johns” they have known previously.

One woman, a long-time community activist against violence against women, asked: “This is illegal, right? Then why aren’t the police doing anything about it?”²

One of the provisions of the prostitution law that the Rhode Island General Assembly passed last November criminalizes landlords who rent to known brothels. Called “permitting prostitution,” landlords are committing a crime if they knowingly permit a building to be used for commercial sexual activity.

Considering the extensive renovations that are required to turn a space into a spa-brothel, including tiled shower rooms and small individual rooms, some with built in beds, it is hard to believe that landlords don’t recognize what the space will be used for.

The first offense for permitting prostitution is a misdemeanor with a penalty of up to a \$1000 fine. The second offense is a felony with a penalty of up to three years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine.



The General Assembly made the first offense a misdemeanor and set the penalty at \$1000 because they wanted to be lenient towards landlords who may not be aware that their renters are engaged in prostitution. However, some landlords now seem to be calculating that a month’s rent (see advertisement in the window) is greater than the fine for permitting prostitution.

CAT believes it is more effective to target the organizers and profiteers of prostitution and trafficking instead of only arresting the women who perform the sex acts in spa-brothels. The prostitutes may make some money, but they are being exploited for the much greater profit of others, particularly the Asian organized crime networks. The women often have little control over their lives. They rarely leave the spa-brothels and are transported from city to city by the criminal network. When they are arrested, the criminal network quickly replaces them and the brothel re-opens.

² CAT notes that some of the signs at the protest stated that human trafficking was occurring at this brothel. Since to our knowledge there has been no police investigation, it is not known if the activities there would meet the legal definition of human trafficking.

It is only when the spa-brothels are shut down that the organized crime networks will no longer be able to recruit and traffic women in these venues. Stopping landlords from renting to the brothel managers is an efficient and effective way for local police to end the exploitation of and violence against women in their jurisdiction.