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Media Attention Gets Inspections at Middletown Spa-Brothel

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Media Attention Gets Inspections at Middletown Spa-Brothel

Citizens still frustrated at lack of official leadership

Melanie Shapiro, co-founder of Citizens Against Trafficking, gives an update on the response to her story on the children's science center's exodus from Middletown because of the Asian spa-brothel next door.

Citizens Against Trafficking's report on the Lee Health Tuina Center and the POW! Science education center (July 17) sparked media attention. Bill Rappleye from *Turnto10.com* did a TV news story on Tuesday, July 21 and the *Newport Daily News* had a front page story on Thursday, July 23. The *Providence Journal* sent a reporter and may be doing a story.

For years, the Bulmers, owners of POW! Science!, have been trying to get police and city officials to take action against the brothel next door. The police have said that there was nothing they could do to close the brothel. Since there is no law against indoor prostitution in Rhode Island, law enforcement's hands are tied. A few months ago, a *Newport Daily News* reporter came to interview the Bulmers about suspected sex trafficking at the spa-brothel, but a story never ran.

Following the media attention to the Bulmer's announcement that they were leaving Middletown because they could no longer tolerate a brothel next to their children's science center, officials finally responded. The local police department, fire department, and a building inspector came to inspect the premises. The building inspector and fire department found violations and asked the Tuina Center to remove a cable locking an exit.

There are conflicting stories about whether the women live on the premises. If they do, it is a violation of the zoning code for people to use a commercial space as a residence. A hairdresser in the strip mall told a reporter from Channel 10 that he sees the women coming from a local motel every morning. Later someone said that they stay in the brothel on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights.

Jenny Meyen, a local Middletown resident and mother has been fighting to shut down the two known brothels in Middletown. Meyen has made phone calls and sent letters to city officials

and her Senator Louis DiPalma. She has been frustrated by their lack of response. After the media attention, they started returning her calls.

“We got a call from the Chief of Police apologizing for not getting back to us sooner and looking forward to meeting with us,” Meyen said. The Chief of Police, Anthony M. Pesare, told her he had been working with the other Chiefs of Police to “get ‘this issue’ out of Rhode Island.”

Meyen urged him to write a letter in support of Representative Joanne Giannini’s bill, H5044A that re-criminalizes prostitution indoors and provides immunity for victims of trafficking. So far he has not done that although other law enforcement agencies, including the Attorney General, the Rhode Island State Police, and Chiefs of Police from Pawtucket and Warwick, have spoken out in support of the bill.

At least one Middletown official has made an effort to suppress the use of the term “brothels.” The Middletown Administration Shawn Brown told an employee not to call Lee Health Tuina Center or Salon 657 “brothels.” Both places advertise in the “adult entertainment” section of the *Providence Phoenix* and men write on “john” forums that they purchase sex acts there. The only customers are men.

Senator DiPalma is now responding to emails and speaking on the phone to people concerned about the brothels. He is one of the senators that voted for the Senate bill that will repeal all the anti-pimping laws in the Rhode Island criminal code and make prostitution a civil violation, similar to a traffic ticket. The Senate bill will further weaken Rhode Island laws against prostitution. It is not known if he still supports the bill he voted for.

Meyen is disappointed by DiPalma’s lack of leadership. “He was my kids’ soccer coach. This is the kind of place where everyone knows one another.” Middletown residents are not used to public officials’ lack of response. Eric Bulmer’s mother contacted Senator DiPalma, who she knows personally, and demanded an answer for his inaction. He declined to comment through email.

Meyen is continuing to organize citizens in the community to demand that officials take a stand. She wants the Chief of Police and the Town Council to write a letter in support of Representative Giannini’s House version of the prostitution bill.

Eric Bulmer says he’s done talking about the one brothel next door. Now, he wants to focus on changing the law in Rhode Island.