

## September 18, 2019: Proponent Testimony on SB 105

Good Morning Chairman Burke and Members of the Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee:



Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 105.

I graduated from the Ohio State University Moritz College of Law in 2012 and have been in Columbus ever. I currently practice family law and focus my practice on low-income survivors of violence. On a volunteer basis, I serve as the Legislative Advocacy Co-Chair for the Central Ohio Reach and Restore Coalition (CORRC). I have held this volunteer position for ten years. CORRC is a central Ohio network of organizations fighting human trafficking in different roles and different sectors. Our members include social service agencies that provide services directly to human trafficking survivors; local law enforcement agencies that investigate and prosecute traffickers; and community organizations and churches striving to raise awareness about this devastating crime. Our mission is to provide a collaborative, comprehensive community response to human trafficking in central Ohio through education, services, advocacy, and prosecution. (You can find out more about our work at [www.facebook.com/centralohioreachandrestorecoalition](http://www.facebook.com/centralohioreachandrestorecoalition).)

In January of 2015 I was on staff part-time at the Salvation Army Anti-Human Trafficking Program when local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies worked together to coordinate a bust of four massage parlors in Delaware and Franklin Counties. They enlisted CORRC members Salvation Army and Asian American Community Services to be on site during the sting and in the days thereafter to provide emergency housing and victim services to the sex trafficking victims pulled from the massage parlors as part of the operation.

I was on the scene for the first 24 hours and part of rotating shifts in the weeks that followed. It is an experience I will never forget. 18 women, all from the same region of China, were pulled from massage parlors in Powell, Worthington, and Columbus that day. They were confused and frightened when they were brought to Salvation Army and AACS staff. One woman had a broken arm that had gone days without any medical attention. Although they spoke no English, we found out through interpreters that many of these women were actually licensed massage therapists back home who were promised good jobs in Ohio. Once they walked into the massage parlors however, the terms of their "employment" changed. They found out that the immigration papers obtained for them by their "employers" were no good and that they would be required to perform sex acts for clients. With no idea where to turn for help, they were trapped. Used condoms were found in the trash cans and cash was found stored in the floor boards. The women were kept in the massage parlor with no where to sleep but the massage tables. Records kept by the massage parlor lead law enforcement to their customers, local central Ohio men who earned on average \$100,000 per year. Their testimony helped secure the conviction of two of the traffickers, who were sentenced to 10 years in prison.

While it was incredible to be a part of bringing these women to safety, to help some of them find apartments, start English classes, connect to immigration relief, and learn from them how to properly

press the dough for Chinese dumplings, it was eye-opening to find out just how difficult it is to stop massage parlors, also known as Illicit Massage Businesses or IMBs.

The traffickers in this case were part of a much larger ring that was rooted in that particular region of China where all of these women were from. They had IMBs in central Ohio, Chicago, and other cities. After the women had been questioned, they were given the option of receiving housing and services from us or of going away on their own. 10 of the women, frightened by what the traffickers who were NOT arrested might do and afraid to trust total strangers with their lives, were picked up by other people in the trafficker's network and taken to Chicago. We hugged them goodbye and gave them clothes and snacks to take with them. I do not know what happened to those women, but I think of them regularly. Although two of their traffickers are behind bars, their other traffickers are still running IMBs around the Midwest getting wealthy by lying to women, trapping them, and sexually exploiting them.

Part of what makes it easy for IMBs to stay in business is the way Ohio and other states fail to regulate massage therapy establishments. There are minimal state laws regulating massage therapy, and most regulation in Ohio is left to city municipalities. In 2012, the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative lead a grassroots effort to pass a city ordinance regulating massage therapy in Warren, Ohio, a city of only 40,000 people that had nearly one dozen IMBs in operation. Most of the clients frequenting these IMBs came in from out of town from across Northeast Ohio. The city law director resisted and would not support the proposed city ordinance. Even local law enforcement told reporters that they received few complaints about the IMBs and that they did not see a problem with them. After extensive advocacy, the city ordinance passed city council unanimously. Later that same year, state level law enforcement raided 8 of those IMBs and shut them down. During the raids, they found over \$100,000 in cash and bags of condoms, passports, and ledgers. Unfortunately, no criminal charges were filed and no victims were connected with social services. Advocates fear that those 8 IMBs simply moved their victims and their operations outside of Warren city limits and resumed business as usual. Law enforcement and social service agencies who work to shut down IMBs describe this process as "whack-a-mole" – once one IMB is shut down, it conveniently opens somewhere with lax laws and lax prosecution.

What SB 105 seeks to do is allow townships to regulate massage therapy establishments, which would allow for massage therapy regulation to reach statewide across Ohio and cover the areas between city municipalities. Simple regulations like requiring massage therapy to be performed by someone licensed in Ohio and requiring massage therapy establishments only operate during daytime hours can go a long way toward preventing IMBs from operating in our communities.

Thank you for your work on this important issue. I am grateful for the leadership of the sponsors and the Ohio Massage Therapy Association on this legislation and for your support as policy makers. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

In Solidarity,

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