

New bid to crack down on S.F. brothels

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A San Francisco supervisor is pushing for a crackdown on permitted businesses that operate as brothels, a long-standing problem that has largely gone unaddressed by city officials.

Supervisor Carmen Chu has asked the city attorney's office to review massage parlor licensing laws in hopes of making it easier to close operations known for prostitution. A Chronicle investigation earlier this month revealed that Health Department inspectors suspect at least 50 of the city's 150 licensed massage parlors are places where sex is traded for money.

At some, rooms have tubs and wall-to-wall mirrors, and the workers dress in lingerie. During one bust two years ago, Mayor Gavin Newsom walked in on a man and a woman engaged in a sex act in the business lobby. Despite Newsom's call for action back then, even that business still operates with a city permit.

That's not uncommon. Over the past few years, federal authorities and local police have made arrests and given citations at places suspected of selling sex, but the businesses are almost never shut down by local health officials.

In fact, Chu's announcement follows a police bust last week in the Sunset District, which she represents, where vice authorities say a health club was actually a den of prostitution.

It was the second time since October that a woman at the Vicente Fitness and Health Care Center had solicited an undercover police officer for an act of prostitution.

The woman in the most recent case was cited, according to authorities. But the business, which is half a block from an elementary school, still has the massage license it was issued by the city several months ago.

Health Department officials have said licenses often are not revoked due to a combination of factors. Agency Director Mitch Katz has said the police are responsible for stopping prostitution. Yet the crime is generally considered a low priority and carries minimal penalties.

Officials also say they lack the resources to aggressively monitor the massage business and to fight the legal battles needed to close brothels. It can be prohibitively expensive to go to court to defend a decision to revoke a license, officials say.

Another hurdle is the vast discretion given to Health Department hearing officers who decide whether a license should be withdrawn.

Under current laws, the hearing officer may revoke an owner's permit for a single health code violation - such as employing a masseuse who wears lingerie. But the hearing officer,

who also is a Health Department employee, has broad discretion under flexible guidelines, and revocations have been rare.

Katz was not available for comment Wednesday.

Chu said she wants the city attorney's office to research whether laws could be amended so a massage establishment's permit could automatically be withdrawn if police issue multiple prostitution citations there.

She also has asked that representatives of all of the departments involved in regulating massage businesses meet with her today to address the problem.

"I have some questions about whether there are solutions within the city codes or on the enforcement side or whether there is something missing in the law that needs to be addressed," Chu said. "We're looking at crafting a solution with legislation or in some other way."

Newsom spokesman Joe Arellano said the mayor "shares Supervisor Chu's concerns regarding the sex trafficking of women in San Francisco, specifically in the Sunset." He said Newsom would be "supportive of her efforts if she decides to move forward with legislation."

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