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Panel: Brothels aid sex trafficking

TRUMMELL DESIRES A BASIC CHANGE IN LAW

By MARK WAITE
PVT

LAS VEGAS -- "Pretty Woman is only a movie. Ain't no Richard Gere running out there trying to pick up your body," said Brenda Myers Powell, a founding member of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

Powell was one of seven women describing the evils of prostitution, both legal and illegal, during a press conference on a report about sex trafficking and prostitution in Nevada Wednesday.

Former Nye County Commissioner Candice Trummell, who heads a new group called the Nevada Coalition Against Sex Trafficking, was one of the speakers.

She talked about slavery and human rights violations involved in prostitution.

Trummell said the three goals of her organization are to educate the public, identify needed services for victims of prostitution and "affect a fundamental change in Nevada's law concerning prostitution, sex trafficking and related matters."

"It is way past time for Nevada to be the last state in the United States of America to finally stand against all forms of slavery," she said. "It is time for Nevada to start hearings in the U.S. government on a crucial and very strong stance against legalized prostitution. The Nevada Coalition Against Sex Trafficking aims to replace the validity of Nevada as the safe haven for modern day slave traders with the legacy of Nevada having the most effective and complete programs."

The panel lobbied for state funding for support services for prostitutes who want to leave the business and felony penalties against their patrons as a way to crack down on illegal prostitution. None of the speakers, when questioned, said they specifically wanted to abolish legal prostitution in Nevada.

Nevada Assemblyman Bob Beers, R-Las Vegas, said under his bill draft in the 2009 session, "It will be illegal to force women into prostitution in Nevada, that's what you have to look at.

"Now if you have somebody who actually wants to engage in that as a lifestyle, I believe we should have avenues for that, but it should also be controlled," he said. "If there is the slightest hint of coercion, then that has to be dealt with very severely."

The conference chairwoman, clinical psychologist Melissa Farley, author and executive director of the San Francisco-based organization Prostitute Research and

Education, released statistics of a two-year report funded by the Trafficking in Persons Office of the State Department.

"A key finding on Nevada prostitution is first, most prostitution in Nevada is illegal, about 90 percent," Farley said. "A second key finding is, despite claims to the contrary, legal prostitution does not protect women from the violence, verbal abuse, physical injury or the diseases."

Farley charged many women in the legal brothels are under intense emotional stress. She said many prostitutes may say they're happy in the business, but she added, "Under duress from legal and illegal pimps, women hide their coerced status in prostitution."

Farley saved most of her criticism for illegal prostitution in Las Vegas, which she called, "the epicenter of North American trafficking for prostitution" with girls coming from every major city on the West Coast and other parts of America.

There's an awareness of human rights violations in sex trafficking in Nevada, but mainly for women who crossed an international border, she said. Authorities should be concerned about women who've been trafficked from Minneapolis as well as from Mexico, Farley said.

"We interviewed 45 women in the legal brothels -- 81 percent of them wanted to get out. Many of them were physically restrained, there was no way for them to get out," Farley said at the conclusion of the press conference. "Domestic violence shelters would be a great place to send them, outreach advertising to any of the brothels, 'If you want to get out, Nye County is willing to help you.'"

Copies of the Las Vegas yellow pages were prominent in front of the speakers. Farley said there were 173 pages in the directory explicitly advertising prostitution. Overall, Farley claimed prostitution was a \$6 billion per year operation in Clark County with \$24 million spent on advertising.

Legal brothels in Nye County are doing nothing to stop illegal prostitution in Clark County, she said.

"Also, we have an exchange of women from the legal brothels into illegal Las Vegas prostitution and back again," Farley said.

Many Pahrump residents commented that brothels have the advantage of keeping illegal prostitutes off the streets when Nye County commissioners decided against allowing a ballot question on the issue in 2004.

Trummell said she couldn't foresee prostitutes standing out on street corners in Pahrump -- even less so in other small Nye County towns -- soliciting sex in the event prostitution were made illegal.

But Trummell admitted if state legislators wanted to crack down on illegal streetwalkers, "The logical thing would be to allow it (prostitution) in places where you're going to have illegal prostitution." She admitted that comment wouldn't be popular with the panel.

Many prostitutes are told lies by pimps about the money, but much of it crosses hands to pimps as well as valets, taxi drivers, disc jockeys and others, Farley said. Myers Powell said legal brothels as well get 50 to 60 percent of a prostitute's earnings, and then the employees also have to pay rent.

"Nevada's rape rate is higher than the U.S. average and way higher than the rape rate in California, New York and New Jersey. Why is this? Legal prostitution creates an atmosphere in this state in which women are not humans equal to them, are disrespected by men, and which then sets the stage of increased violence against women," Farley said.

"I cringe when I hear it said that prostitution is a victimless crime," said Olivia Howard, another member of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. She said people have a popular myth about "ladies of the night" who disappear in the daytime, unaware of the harsh reality and horrendous abuse.

"Prostituted women are no safer in indoor venues than they are on the street corner, jumping from car to car," Howard said.

Myers Powell said if an average prostitute has an average of five tricks per day, that's over 1,800 customers per year. "Men are in and out of her body, using her body like a toilet," she said.

At the end of the press conference, she angrily shouted at the audience, "They say, oh, c'est la vie, this is what they want to do. It's not happening like that, ladies and gentlemen. I want to see you turn 1,800 tricks a year, and over 10 years you might have 1 million sold, you could open up your own franchise."

Kathleen Mitchell, an ex-prostitute who founded a support group for prostitutes called Dignity, said, "Women are bought and sold on an auction block in any city in any state of the United States and also internationally. Sexual trafficking is one of the most inhumane forms of human slavery that there is."

She said the movie industry should stop glamorizing prostitution.

Ex-prostitute Jody Williams, founder of Sex Workers Anonymous, compared the promotion of prostitution with the way the tobacco companies marketed cigarettes. "They're taking advantage of your ignorance of the industry," she said.

Williams said ex-prostitutes came to her organization suffering from a variety of physical and emotional disorders. "Women in prostitution suffer from the same combat stress that Vietnam and combat vets do, but they have fewer services than vets do," she said.

The illegal pimps are replaced by "the legal pimps" in the brothels, Williams charged.

"The current law in Nevada which allows legal prostitution and talks about wanting them to use their earnings to generate tax dollars for the state of Nevada actually makes the state of Nevada a third pimp for these women," Williams said.