

The Local Machinery of a National War on Asian Massage Workers

A Santa Barbara Case Study

EROTIC SERVICE PROVIDERS
LEGAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH PROJECT

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Introduction

In December 2025, the Santa Barbara Police Department and City Attorney asked city lawmakers for more power over local massage businesses. Police wanted authority to conduct warrantless inspections, investigate workers' backgrounds, and deny or revoke permits over alleged misconduct, even without criminal charges. Massage therapists would also need certification from a private nonprofit or a temporary exception from the city.[1]

Police say it's about public safety and preventing trafficking. The ordinance also specifically targets prostitution.[2]

So naturally, we at the Erotic Service Providers Legal, Educational, and Research Project (ESPLER Project) wanted to know what was happening in Santa Barbara's massage businesses that called for all this new police power.

The enforcement records did not make it make sense.

In response to our public records requests, Santa Barbara police produced no documented prostitution or trafficking arrests connected to massage businesses during the periods covered by their responses. That doesn't mean trafficking never happens. But if police and the city want this much power over an entire industry, shouldn't they have some evidence that it will actually help someone?

Santa Barbara isn't a trail blazer. Police departments, anti-trafficking nonprofits, and regulatory agencies nationwide are promoting strategies to identify and shut down suspected “illicit massage businesses,” often through licensing and administrative enforcement rather than criminal prosecutions.

What started as a question about a local ordinance led us through police records, anti-trafficking grants, nonprofit board meetings, and a national campaign to shut down thousands of massage businesses.

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[1] City of Santa Barbara. (2026, October 15). *Proposed amendments to Chapter 5.76 of the Santa Barbara Municipal Code* [Draft ordinance]. https://santabarbaraca.gov/proposed-massage-ordinance-information

[2] City of Santa Barbara. (2026b, October 15). *Proposed amendments to Chapter 5.76 of the Santa Barbara Municipal Code* [Draft ordinance]. https://santabarbaraca.gov/proposed-massage-ordinance-information

Where Is The Problem Santa Barbara Police Department and City Attorney Are Allegedly Trying To Solve?

What police told the city

When police presented the ordinance to the City Council's Ordinance Committee in January, they described a restrained approach to enforcement. Routine inspections would be scheduled, unannounced visits would follow complaints, and officers would generally seek compliance before issuing citations.[3] The October 15 draft told a different story: up to six unannounced inspections a year, without a warrant, complaint, or evidence of wrongdoing.[4]

There's reason to be concerned about what routine inspections become in practice. In a survey of 61 Asian migrant holistic practitioners organized by a grassroots, community-led organization in Toronto – Butterfly: the Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network (hereafter Butterfly) – found that nearly two-thirds of research participants worried about police inspections and raids. Fifty three percent "described police officers as abusive, oppressive, or humiliating." Although a third had been victims of robbery or theft, only seven percent had reported it to law enforcement.[5]

These findings raised the question: Had police found hotbeds of sex trafficking in massage businesses to justify this potential violation of constitutional privacy rights – and make workers even more afraid of them? Had they found any sex trafficking at a massage business in the City of Santa Barbara?

Commander Brian Miller told the *Santa Barbara Independent* that police had investigated "at least a dozen complaints" over the previous three to five years. These included tips, allegations against individual workers, and code or fire violations involving living conditions. Miller couldn't give an exact number of enforcement actions. He estimated that the city had

[3] City of Santa Barbara. (2026, January 13). Ordinance Committee meeting: Amendments to the massage ordinance [Meeting transcript]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IcR5SW_z0M

[4] City of Santa Barbara. (2026, October 15). *Proposed amendments to Chapter 5.76 of the Santa Barbara Municipal Code* [Draft ordinance]. https://santabarbaraca.gov/proposed-massage-ordinance-information

[5] Lam, E. (2018, May). Survey on Toronto holistic practitioners' experiences with bylaw enforcement and police. Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network), Coalition Against Abuse by Bylaw Enforcement, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, & Holistic Practitioners Alliance. https://www.butterflysw.org/_files/ugd/5bd754_6d780ceba3cb4f6c85de4d3e9e0b7475.pdf

approximately 40 massage establishments employing 284 therapists.[6] That's an average of two to four complaints a year across approximately 40 businesses. And police haven't said that any involved trafficking.

What ESPLER Project's Records Requests Found

In December 2025, ESPLER Project asked the Santa Barbara Police Department for records of prostitution enforcement going back to February 2022, along with records concerning trafficking investigations, interagency cooperation, funding, and surveillance. We requested arrest statistics, incident reports, investigative records, grants, contracts, and information about the technologies police were using.[7]

Police sent us a spreadsheet with one arrest. Of a man. At a hotel.

The March 2024 arrest for misdemeanor solicitation or engagement in prostitution under Penal Code § 647(b)(1) did not connect the arrest to a massage business or trafficking.[8]

A separate public records request by Dirk Langer provides a longer look at Santa Barbara police enforcement. Langer requested records of arrests and charges under California's prostitution statute, Penal Code § 647(b), and human trafficking statute, § 236.1, from January 1, 2015, through February 28, 2026.[9]

In an April 3, 2026 response, police provided a spreadsheet containing 75 arrest and citation entries: 69 for prostitution and six for human trafficking. Of the trafficking entries, three were under § 236.1(a) and three under § 236.1(c), which concerns trafficking involving minors. Two arrest numbers appeared under both prostitution and trafficking statutes, leaving 73 distinct arrest numbers.[10]

The spreadsheet also identifies locations. Several entries were recorded at hotels, including two trafficking entries at 3505 State Street, the address of a Motel 6. Google Maps does not identify any of the addresses as a massage business.

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[6] Hayden, T. (2026, January 28). Santa Barbara massage therapists tense over new regulations. Santa Barbara Independent. https://www.independent.com/2026/01/28/santa-barbara-massage-therapists-tense-over-new-regulations/

[7] ESPLER Project, Inc. (2025, December 3). *[Public records request to the Santa Barbara Police Department concerning prostitution enforcement, funding, interagency cooperation, and surveillance technologies].* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1O2QV5M5g_Vu8HUE0M-iXJzOpviPsQBwX/view?usp=drive_link

[8] Santa Barbara Police Department. (n.d.). *[Arrest data produced in response to public records request PRA 25-253]* [Data set].

[9] Santa Barbara Police Department. (2026, April 3). *Public records request (26-216)* [Response letter to Dirk Langer]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fQ7EJgt_q6LbijQkNLmw_w42C58b_bpD/view?usp=drive_link

[10] Santa Barbara Police Department. (2026). *PRA 26-216 responsive data* [Data set].

Police declined to provide all the underlying reports, citing their volume, and invited Langer to narrow his request. Without those reports, we cannot determine the circumstances of the alleged trafficking, how many victims were identified, or how the cases ended.

ESPLER Project subsequently requested another set of arrest statistics for March 1-July 30, 2026, this time covering prostitution, trafficking, pimping, pandering, and Penal Code § 653.25. Police reported zero arrests or citations under any of the five statutes.[11]

We also requested records from the Santa Barbara County District Attorney. The office identified 40 Superior Court cases involving prostitution arrests or charges between February 2022 and November 2025, and 20 involving human trafficking arrests or charges between January 2015 and November 2025.[12]

Those are countywide cases, covering different periods. The lists don't tell us where the alleged offenses occurred, whether any involved massage businesses, or how the cases ended. California's trafficking statute also isn't limited to commercial sex.

We looked at more than a decade of arrest records and still couldn't find the massage-business trafficking problem police say requires all these new powers over massage workers.

A search of news coverage identified only a 2022 arrest at a massage parlor within Santa Barbara city limits. That arrest involved an allegation of sexual assault, not prostitution or sex trafficking. It illustrates an important distinction: violence and abuse can occur in massage workplaces without constituting trafficking, and those offenses deserve investigation in their own right.

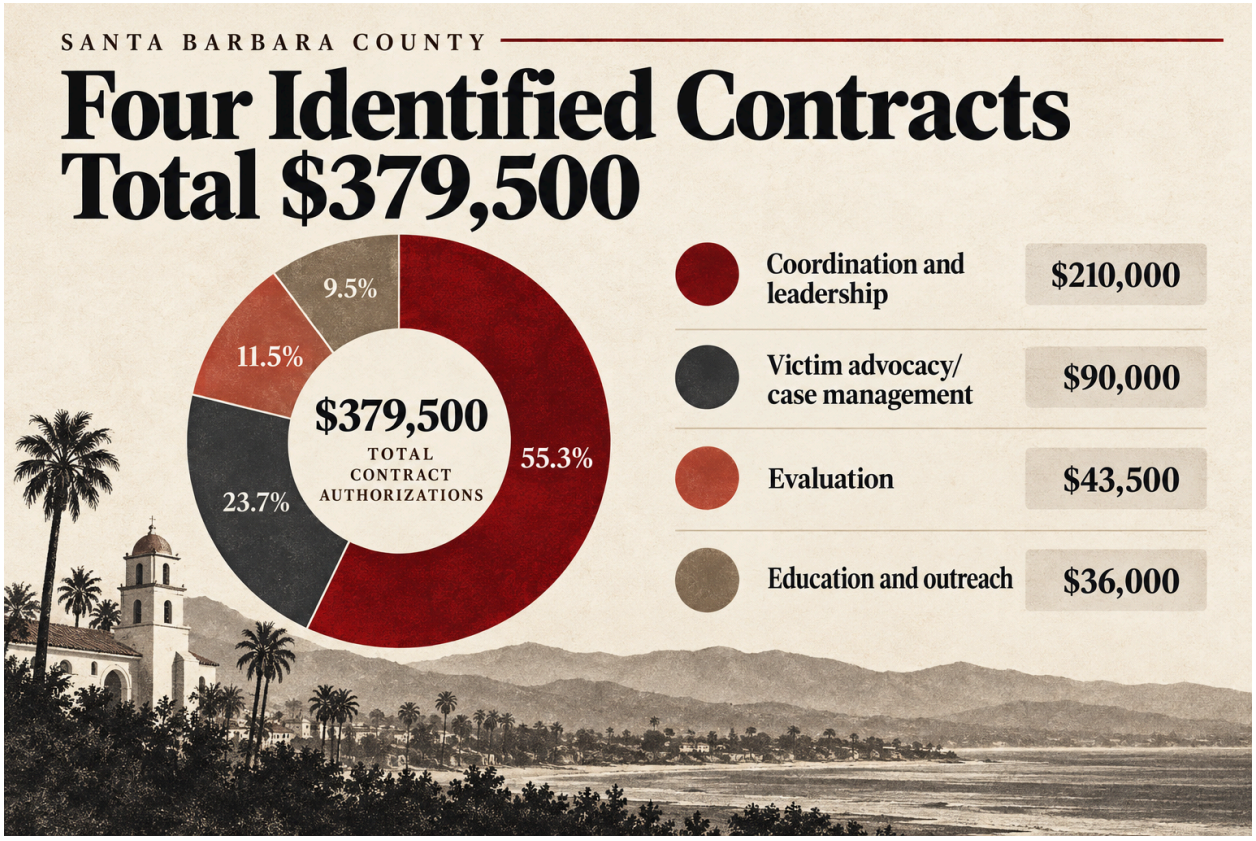
Santa Barbara's Anti-Trafficking Infrastructure: What Do the Numbers Show?

Santa Barbara County has operated a human trafficking task force since 2016, bringing together law enforcement, prosecutors, service providers, and nonprofit organizations. Its work is supported by federal and state grants, including a $950,000 Department of Justice

[11] Santa Barbara Police Department. (2026, October 15). *[Arrest and citation counts by statute, March 1–July 30, 2026, produced in response to public records request PRA 26-2583]* [Data set]

[12]Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office. (2025, December 30). *Public Records Act request, December 3, 2025* [Response letter to ESPLER Project, Inc.].https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z1vvX2kN3lbGFcW-NafMPLIK05tmzvBd/view?usp=drive_link

award covering October 2023 through September 2026 and recurring funding through California's Human Trafficking Advocacy Program.[13][14]



The Santa Barbara District attorney provided several documents relevant to the task force funding, but not all of the documents that would explain where every penny went. Instead we know that:

- Kingdom Causes, Inc. received $210,000 to act as the coordinator of the task force, which included both $60k/year for a program coordinator and $10k/year for a supervisor. In return they agreed to do things like convene a steering committee, facilitate working group meetings, and develop a strategic plan.[15] During the granting

[13] County of Santa Barbara. (2023, November 7). *Department of Justice human trafficking grant award agreement with the District Attorney's Office* (File No. 23-01018). Board of Supervisors. https://santabarbara.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?GUID=63FF1DDA-1110-42E8-8556-BCEF71A9C023&ID=6400324

[14] County of Santa Barbara. (2026a, January 27). *California Governor's Office of Emergency Services Human Trafficking Advocacy Program grant* (File No. 26-00067). Board of Supervisors. https://santabarbara.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?GUID=D5EB7A7F-5014-468C-8246-B2A40CBF7434&ID=7826826

[15] County of Santa Barbara, & Kingdom Causes, Inc., dba City Net. (2023, December 12). *Contractor agreement between County of Santa Barbara and Kingdom Causes, Inc., dba City Net: Collaborative*

period Kingdom Causes, Inc. led in creating SAFE SBC, which "was created to support the 3-Year Strategic Plan with fundraising and awareness efforts throughout Santa Barbara County, through operating a fund that receives tax-deductible donations…"[16]

- Santa Barbara Alliance for Community Transformation, an organization that serves and organizes with homeless people, received $36,000 for prevention, education, and outreach, including awareness events and film screening, over three years.[17]
- Kathryn O'Brien was the recipient of a purchase order for $43,500 to provide program evaluation for the grant.[18]
- North County Rape Crisis & Child Protection Center was awarded up to $90,000 for actual victim advocacy and case management services![19]

It is very profitable for these organizations to educate, legislate, train, evaluate, strategically plan, and lead. These activities don't require the existence of sex trafficking cases, or sex trafficking survivors, but a moral panic and war on Asian massage workers doesn't hurt.

What does $950,000 in anti-trafficking task force money achieve?

The Santa Barbara District Attorney also included one semi-annual performance report covering a six month period for the grant.[20] Did we mention the name of the grant is "*Services* for Victims of Human Trafficking"? Although it would have been most illuminating to see all of the performance reviews, we did learn some things from the one review provided:

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leadership and administrative support of the Santa Barbara County Human Trafficking Task Force [Executed agreement].

[16] Kingdom Causes, Inc. (n.d.). *Santa Barbara human trafficking task force*. https://www.kingdomcauses.org/antiht

[17] County of Santa Barbara. (2023c, December 12). *Order CN6849* [Purchase order for Santa Barbara Alliance for Community Transformation human trafficking prevention and education services].

[18] County of Santa Barbara. (2023b, November 6). *Order CN6693* [Purchase order for Kathryn O'Brien's project evaluation services for the OVC23 federal human trafficking grant]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k6oLUbss3NdJS5NQp5uInlUAfQsMjHwH/view?usp=drive_link

[19] County of Santa Barbara. (2023a, November 6). *Order CN6691* [Purchase order for North County Rape Crisis & Child Protection Center advocacy and case management services]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XQAOYMurpjReKT46vfbbgRm0uiso5whL/view?usp=drive_link

[20] County of Santa Barbara. (2026, July 30). *Semiannual performance report: Human trafficking non-ECM victim service providers grant program, January 1–June 30, 2026* (Award No. 2023-15POVC-23-GG-04087-HT). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kFHEi2tmAzBTUnORMs_pc0FBrrOfsC6J/view?usp=drive_link

- During the six month period, the total number of potential victims of sex trafficking served was 24. No labor trafficking victims were served.
- The total number of *new* potential victims of sex trafficking served was 12, and the other 12 were ongoing.
- The total number of Asian trafficking victims served was 0.
- The service of providing information about the criminal justice system was provided 26 times. Does it really take a federal grant for police and prosecutors to provide information to crime victims?
- Personal advocacy or accompaniment services were provided to 6 potential victims.
- Safety planning was provided 11 times.
- Hotline counseling was provided 17 times.
- Case management was provided 4 times.
- Housing and shelter were provided 0 times.
- There were 8.5 participating law enforcement programs and 1 victim services provider.

If the goal of the grant was to provide services for victims of human trafficking, as stated, the program is failing. At a rate of 24 new potential sex trafficking victims per year (if we double the numbers from the 6 month report) and $316,666 in grant money per year, the program could have paid a full time caseworker $80k and given each potential sex trafficking victim $9,861. That money would go a lot further towards serving potential trafficking victims than all of the program evaluating and working group meetings that the grant instead funded.[21]

Is helping victims actually the point? Or is the point to obtain funding for organizations to have meetings and develop strategic plans and then create fundraising programs to continue to fund jobs in the rescue industry?

According to the District Attorney's published performance figures, the county's anti-trafficking operations have produced 279 investigations over the last 10 years, identified 102 potential traffickers, and resulted in charges against 59 people. Thirty-nine pleaded guilty to offenses grouped together as human trafficking, pimping, and pandering. The county also reports identifying 279 potential trafficking victims and offering them services. The report of 279 potential trafficking victims over a 10 year period, or 28 potential

[21] Ruckert, A., Huynh, C., & Labonté, R. (2018). Reducing health inequities: is universal basic income the way forward?. Journal of Public Health, 40(1), 3-7. https://academic.oup.com/jpubhealth/article/40/1/3/2966187?login=true

victims per year, lends validity to the estimated 24 victims per year extrapolated from the performance report.

The National Campaign Against Asian Massage Businesses

From fighting trafficking to targeting "illicit massage businesses"

It's not just Santa Barbara. Police departments, anti-trafficking nonprofits, and regulatory agencies across the country have been developing strategies to identify and shut down suspected "illicit massage businesses," often without having to establish that trafficking occurred.

In 2018, Polaris, a major anti-trafficking nonprofit, published a report estimating that more than 9,000 "illicit massage businesses" were operating in the United States, generating nearly $2.5 billion annually. Somehow, all 9,000 illicit establishments were Asian massage businesses, and so "illicit" within the anti-prostitution movement has come to be synonymous with Asian.[22]

Polaris arrived at those figures by mapping and cross-referencing publicly available information, not by investigating 9,000 businesses and establishing that trafficking occurred in them. Nevertheless, the report helped establish Asian massage businesses as a national anti-trafficking enforcement target.

Polaris recommended using business registration and ownership records to identify suspected trafficking networks and examining the regulatory systems that allowed these businesses to operate. Its materials described workers in these establishments as predominantly immigrant women from China and South Korea.[23]

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[22] Lee, E. (2025). Asian massage work as erotic healing: Performance (auto)ethnography within Red Canary Song. *Feminist Review, 139*(1), 15–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/01417789251332146 Eunbi Lee. 2025

[23] Polaris. (2018). *Hidden in plain sight: How corporate secrecy facilitates human trafficking in illicit massage parlors*. https://polarisproject.org/resources/hidden-in-plain-sight-how-corporate-secrecy-facilitates-human-trafficking-in-illicit-massage-parlors/

The strategy treats an entire category of businesses as suspicious, then uses business records, licensing requirements, and regulatory enforcement to disrupt them. It doesn't require police to even suspect trafficking before they begin targeting a workplace.

Asian migrant sex worker organizations have been challenging this approach for years. In *Un-Licensed*,[24] Red Canary Song, the Massage Parlor Outreach Project, and Butterfly document how licensing laws and police enforcement have been used against Asian massage workers in New York, Seattle, Toronto, and Rhode Island. Workers can face arrests, fines, business closures, and loss of income without anyone establishing that trafficking occurred.



[24] Red Canary Song, Massage Parlor Outreach Project, & Butterfly. (2022, February). Un-licensed: Asian migrant massage licensure and the racialized policing of poverty

How to Shut Down 16,000 Massage Businesses

Another organization promoting this strategy is The Network, which says it works with law enforcement and regulators in more than 17 states and 50 municipalities and maintains a database of more than 16,000 suspected "illicit massage businesses".[25]

The Network describes three main activities: data collection, network analysis, and "strategic disruption." It maps suspected businesses, examines connections among owners and operators, and works with government agencies to make those businesses more risky to operate.

The Network calls this approach "strategic disruption." Authorities use licensing violations, zoning restrictions, inspections, and pressure on landlords to shut businesses down. These are powerful tools because they don't require the same evidence as a criminal trafficking prosecution. A city can deny a permit or penalize a business for violating licensing rules without proving that anyone was trafficked. They can pretend they won the war on sex trafficking by shutting down Asian businesses.

In January 2025, following a gathering of approximately 250 anti-trafficking leaders, the CEO of Allies Against Slavery, John Nehme asked on LinkedIn: "How can we disrupt 15,000 illicit massage businesses by 2030?"

Nehme described police, prosecutors, regulators, data specialists, and anti-trafficking advocates collaborating on business mapping, intelligence sharing, licensing enforcement, financial investigations, and pressure on property owners. The stated goal was disrupting the businesses. His post did not address what would happen to the workers and business owners whose livelihoods would be disrupted.[26]

CAMTC, Operation Get Smart, and the Spread of Administrative Enforcement

In October 2023, The Network presented its approach to the California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTC), the private nonprofit responsible for certifying massage professionals in California. Its presentation described data collection, network analysis, and strategic disruption (California Massage Therapy Council [CAMTC], 2023a).

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[25] The Network. (n.d.). *Ending the illicit massage industry in the United States*. Retrieved October 29, 2026, from https://www.thenetworkteam.org/

[26] Nehme, J. (2025, January). *How can we disrupt 15,000 illicit massage businesses by 2030?* [LinkedIn post]. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/john-nehme_humantrafficking-antitrafficking-advocacy-activity-7285666239258001408-yTWw

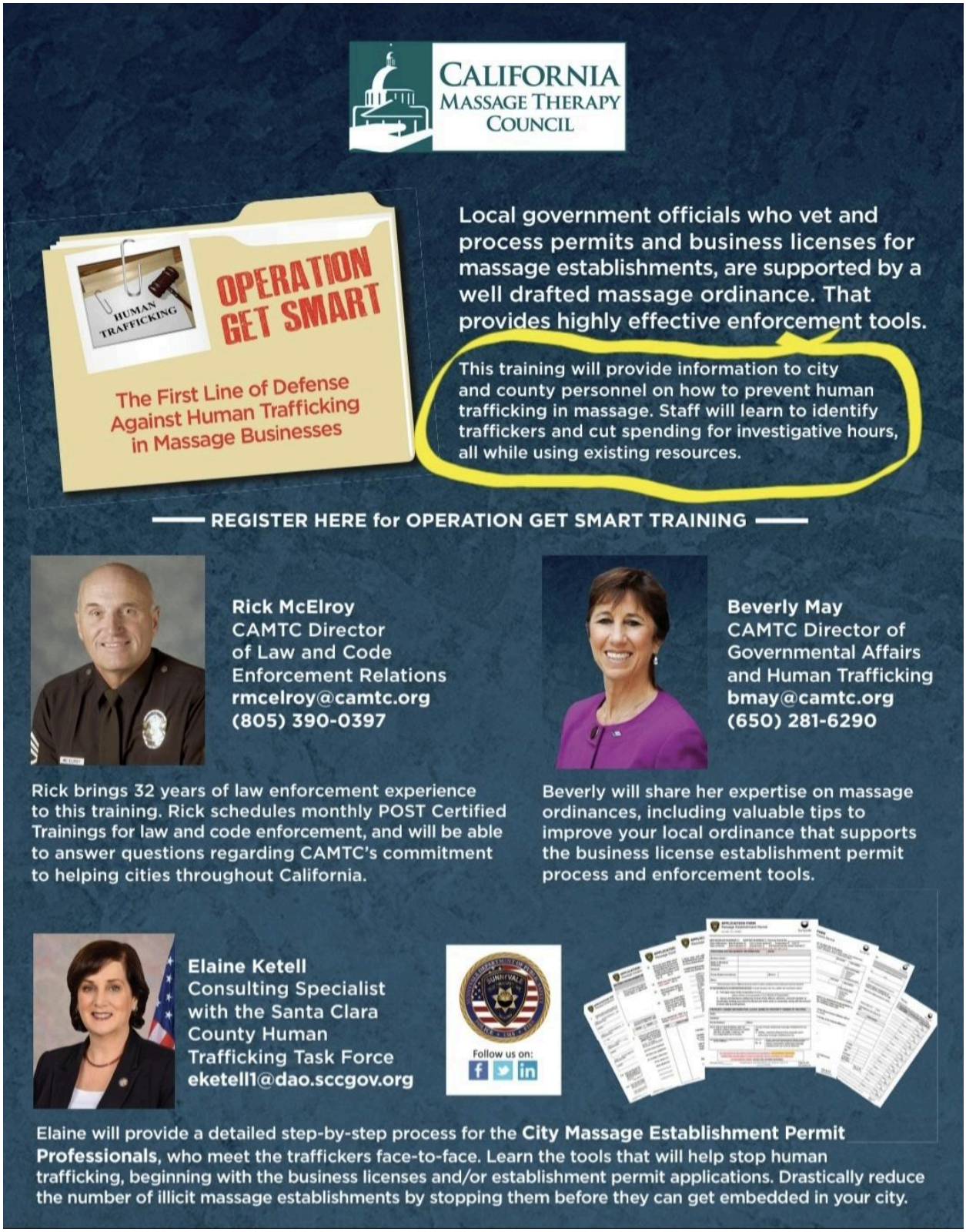
CAMTC's board subsequently voted to give The Network the right to appoint a representative to its board. The Network selected Dr. Stephany Powell, who had previously served on CAMTC's board as a representative of another anti-trafficking organization, Journey Out (CAMTC, 2023b, p. 42).

Powell is now CAMTC's Director of Law & Code Enforcement Relations. CAMTC invites police and local government employees to contact her for free law and code enforcement training (CAMTC, n.d.).

Collaborations between CAMTC and The Network included trainings, conferences, and providing law enforcement with “heat maps” of suspected “illicit massage businesses.”

CAMTC also trains local governments to identify and regulate suspected illicit massage establishments. Its training program, initially called Operation Get Smart, now offers monthly instruction for law and code enforcement officers and municipal employees.

CAMTC advertises the training as helping officials curtail illicit massage establishments using existing resources. Its materials describe identifying suspected traffickers through business license applications, strengthening local massage ordinances, and preventing suspected illicit businesses from opening.



Beverly May, CAMTC's former director of governmental affairs, taught participants how to improve local massage ordinances and screen business applications. The point was not

simply to identify whether anyone was trafficked. It was to give municipal officials tools to prevent suspected businesses from opening or to close them through regulatory enforcement.

CAMTC also helped develop the rules themselves.

In August 2022, May described maintaining a “Cut & Paste” file of ordinance provisions she could share with municipalities. The provisions were intended to prevent suspected illicit massage businesses from opening or facilitate their closure through regulatory enforcement (CAMTC, 2022, p. 61).

What This Means in Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara's proposal looks a lot like the ordinances CAMTC has been teaching cities to adopt.

The city proposes additional permit requirements, employee screening, certification rules, expanded inspections, and new grounds for denying or revoking permits. These measures would allow officials to regulate and penalize massage businesses without first establishing that anyone committed a prostitution or trafficking offense (City of Santa Barbara, 2025, 2026b).

CAMTC certification is particularly important. California does not require massage therapists to obtain CAMTC certification statewide, but Santa Barbara proposes making certification, or a qualifying exception, a condition of working in the city.

Santa Barbara would be giving a private nonprofit the power to decide which massage therapists can keep working in the city. Unlike a state licensing board, CAMTC is not subject to all the same public accountability requirements. During its 2025 review, legislative committees highlighted gaps in public access to records, whistleblower protections, and administrative procedures. The Legislature ultimately retained CAMTC rather than replacing it with a state licensing board, extending its authorization until January 1, 2030 – but required additional safeguards, including public comment on significant policy changes and public access to records beginning July 1, 2027. That records requirement is itself qualified: CAMTC must provide access “to the extent practicable.”[27]

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[27] California State Assembly Committee on Business and Professions, & California State Senate Committee on Business, Professions, and Economic Development. (2025, March 24). *Background paper for the California Massage Therapy Council: Joint sunset review oversight hearing*. https://abp.assembly.ca.gov/media/1246

A.B. 1504, 2025–2026 Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2025). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1504

The proposed ordinance also reflects CAMTC's emphasis on using business licensing and administrative inspections to identify suspected “illicit” establishments. Santa Barbara's inspection provisions would allow officials to examine credentials, employee records, and potential evidence that workers are living at their workplaces.

We don't know whether Santa Barbara officials attended CAMTC's trainings, received its model ordinance provisions, or worked directly with The Network. But CAMTC has been teaching California cities how to write and enforce ordinances just like this one.

Operation Coast to Coast: The Criminal Enforcement Side of the Campaign

While CAMTC teaches cities how to use licensing and inspections against massage businesses, other anti-trafficking organizations are helping coordinate and finance nationwide police operations.

Operation Coast to Coast is a series of nationwide enforcement operations organized by the Human Trafficking Training Center (HTTC), a for-profit organization that trains police to investigate trafficking. A recent investigation traced HTTC's origins to Missouri's right-wing anti-trafficking network, including connections to Exodus Cry, a Christian anti-pornography organization that campaigns against the sex industry.[28]

On September 10, 2026, more than 250 law enforcement agencies and partner organizations participated in an operation across 22 states. Organizers announced 125 arrests by task forces combining nonprofits, local police, and federal agencies. They did not announce how many deportation proceedings resulted.[29]

The headline numbers sound impressive until you look at what happened in individual jurisdictions.

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[28] McGrady, M., Jr. (2026, October 21). Savior complex: Inside the right-wing money machine behind anti-trafficking performance politics connecting Missouri and Utah. The Pitch. https://www.thepitchkc.com/savior-complex-inside-the-right-wing-money-machine-behind-anti-trafficking-performance-politics-connecting-missouri-and-utah/

[29] Safe House Project. (2026, September 14). *Nationwide effort in Operation Coast to Coast to combat human trafficking results in 125 arrests* [Press release]. https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/nationwide-effort-in-operation-coast-to-coast-to-combat-human-trafficking-results-in-125-arrests-302877791.html

California's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported that the Sacramento portion of the operation resulted in cite-and-release arrests for soliciting and engaging in prostitution, along with traffic enforcement and vehicle impoundments.[30]

Apparently, arresting people for prostitution, writing traffic tickets, and impounding cars now count as rescuing trafficking victims.

A review of news and police press releases turned up nine operations at 32 “illicit massage businesses” in the last six months.[31]

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[30] California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2026, September 23). *OCS joins effort targeting nationwide human trafficking operation*. https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/insidecdcr/2026/09/23/ocs-assists-in-nationwide-human-trafficking-operation/

[31] Baldwin Park News. (2026, September 30). *Baldwin Park massage spa raided in suspected human trafficking investigation Wednesday morning*. https://baldwinparknewsonline.com/baldwin-park-massage-spa-raided-in-suspected-human-trafficking-investigation-wednesday-morning/ baldwinparknewsonline.com

Kim, S. (2026, July 10). *Bakersfield massage parlor owner arrested for allegedly running prostitution operation at business*. AOL. https://www.aol.com/articles/bakersfield-massage-parlor-owner-arrested-235000000.html AOL

Martin, J. A. (2026, October 7). *CHP-led raid hits 13 Redding massage parlors in human trafficking probe*. Siskiyou News. https://www.siskiyou.news/2026/10/07/chp-led-raid-hits-13-redding-massage-parlors-in-human-trafficking-probe/ SISKIYOU NEWS

Music, L. (2026, June 5). *Fortuna Massage & Spa raided; one arrested on prostitution charges*. Redheaded Blackbelt. https://kymkemp.com/2026/06/05/fortuna-massage-one-arrested-on-prostitution-charges/ Redheaded Blackbelt

NBCLA Staff. (2026, May 14). *Police shut down suspected illicit massage parlor in Whittier*. NBC Los Angeles. https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/whittier-illicit-massage-parlor-shut-down/3890831/ NBC Los Angeles

Ozebek, K. (2026, July 27). *LAPD detectives say some women cited in South Bay massage parlor sting may be trafficking victims*. ABC7 Los Angeles. https://abc7.com/post/los-angeles-police-say-women-cited-south-bay-massage-parlor-sting-may-trafficking-victims/19568937/ abc7.com

San José Police Department. (2026, May 12). *SJPD conducts enforcement operation on illegal massage parlors* [Media advisory]. https://www.sjpd.org/Home/Components/News/News/2809/ www.sjpd.org

7 Southern California massage parlors busted in illegal sexual activity crackdown. (2026, August 19). FOX 11 Los Angeles. https://www.foxla.com/news/covina-police-massage-parlor-enforcement-operation.amp FOX 11 Los Angeles

Smith, P. (2026, August 20). *Human trafficking task force keeping an eye on SCV*. The Santa Clarita Valley Signal. https://signalscv.com/2026/08/trafficking-task-force-targets-scv-spa/

California Massage Business Raids

April 27–October 27, 2026

Based on media reporting and police announcements

9 reported operations | **32** business locations

DOCUMENTED MINIMUM

1 **May 7 • San José • 4 businesses**
Names not reported; Sunol St., Lincoln Ave. (two), Almaden Rd.
Inspections; three people described as survivors. No arrests announced.

2 **May 13 • Whittier • 1 business**
Name not reported; 11100 block of Whittier Boulevard.
Search warrant and closure. Arrest status not reported.

3 **June 4 • Fortuna • 1 business**
Fortuna Massage & Spa
Labor complaint led to raid; one person arrested on prostitution-related misdemeanors.

4 **July 7 • Bakersfield • 1 business**
Dream Massage
Employee cited for prostitution; owner arrested July 10 for pandering and maintaining a house of prostitution.

5 **South Bay • 3 businesses**
Raid date unknown; reported July 27. Names not reported.
Prostitution citations, including one issued to a Chinese woman police described as a possible trafficking victim.

6 **Covina • 7 businesses**
Operation dates unknown; reported August 19. Names not reported.
Multiple citations and arrests; exact counts and individual charges not disclosed.

7 **August 19 • Santa Clarita • 1 business**
Clarita Spa & Massage
Two women questioned and cleared as suspects. No charges announced.

8 **September 30 • Baldwin Park • 1 business**
Green Spa
Approximately five suspected trafficking victims offered services. No arrests.

9 **October 5 • Redding • 13 businesses**
Ahh So Good Massage; Healthy 100% Massage; Sunny Foot Massage; A1 Massage; Oriental Massage & Yan Bodyworks; Sakura Massage; 407 Massage Therapy; Peaceful Massage; Healthy Massage–Asian Massage; Tain Massage; Hot Stone Spa; Better Massage; Ocean Dream Massage.
One person identified as a trafficking victim; prostitution-related charges recommended for 12 people. No arrests announced.

Based on media reporting and police announcements. Not a statewide census. Asian ownership or staffing was not established at every location. Seven entries give operation dates; two give publication dates.

Sources: SJPD; NBC Los Angeles; Redheaded Blackbelt; KGET; ABC7; FOX 11; The Signal; Baldwin Park News; Siskiyou News.

Who Pays for These Operations?

One major funder is Our Rescue, formerly Operation Underground Railroad, the organization founded by former DHS agent Tim Ballard, whose purported rescue operations inspired *Sound of Freedom*.

The organization became closely associated with conservative Christian anti-trafficking activism and right-wing political figures. Ballard left in 2023 amid allegations of sexual misconduct, which he denied. Our Rescue subsequently rebranded after a federal lawsuit alleged that the organization had trafficked its own volunteers.

Our Rescue helps finance police operations, provides training and technology, and supports intelligence gathering. Financial records examined by the Sex Work Policy Newsletter show that it provided $245,000 to HTTC in 2025.[32]

HTTC founder Dan Nash described Our Rescue's role in supporting Operation Coast to Coast:

> "Our Rescue made sure no agency sat on the sidelines for lack of funding."[33]

A private anti-trafficking organization is helping pay for police departments to participate in nationwide enforcement operations targeting Asian owned businesses and workers for arrest and deportation.

ICE is also part of the broader anti-trafficking enforcement machinery. It participates in task forces and massage-business raids, and the consequences for workers can be devastating.

In June 2025, ICE raided nine massage businesses in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and detained ten Chinese women for possible deportation. The operation involved local police, prosecutors, ICE, Border Patrol, and other agencies.[34]

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[32] Burns, T. (2026). *Last week in stings and legislation*. Sex Work Policy Newsletter. https://taraburns.substack.com/p/last-week-in-stings-and-legislation

[33] Human Trafficking Training Center. (2026, April 24). 129 human trafficking victims identified in one of the largest anti-trafficking operations in U.S. history [Press release]. PR Newswire. https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/129-human-trafficking-victims-identified-in-one-of-the-largest-anti-trafficking-operations-in-us-history-302753128.html

[34] U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (2025, June 11). ICE conducts worksite inspections at Baton Rouge massage parlors. https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-conducts-worksite-inspections-baton-rouge-massage-parlors

ICE called it an anti-trafficking investigation, but its own announcement described ten women facing immigration proceedings, not ten women being rescued.

Police, city governments, and non profits are building systems to attack Asian massage businesses. Whether through regulatory enforcement or police operations, the workers end up out of work, jailed, or deported, while authorities take credit for stopping trafficking.

CAMTC and The Network

From Strategy to Local Ordinances, 2019–2026



STRATEGY, TRAINING & ORDINANCE SUPPORT

2019

National convening

Beverly May later reported attending a Washington, D.C., convening organized by The Network Team and Polaris. November 2022 minutes identify it as the first convening.

2021–2022

CAMTC develops and shares ordinance language

May reports sending cities sample ordinances and marked-up language. In August 2022, she describes a "Cut & Paste" file to help cities prevent suspected illicit establishments from opening or close them through regulatory enforcement.

November 2022

Operation Get Smart takes shape

May describes training licensing, police, and code-enforcement personnel to screen applications and implement massage ordinances, collaborating with a Sunnyvale official on application review.

March–May 2023

Promoting preemptive permit enforcement

Rick McElroy promotes Operation Get Smart at the California Police Chiefs Conference: screen applications and deny suspected illicit businesses before they open, avoiding the expense of criminal investigations.

Oct.–Dec. 2023

The Network gains a formal CAMTC role

After an October presentation, CAMTC grants The Network an appointment seat, replacing Journey Out. December materials name Stephany Powell as its appointee. CAMTC reports 195 Operation Get Smart attendees in 2023.

March 2024

Regional Operation Get Smart training

CAMTC and Sunnyvale organize municipal training on strengthening ordinances and screening business applications. Presenters named: Beverly May, Rick McElroy, and Sunnyvale analyst Elaine Ketell.

2024–2025

Continued municipal ordinance work

Staff reports describe consultations involving Riverbank, Santa Rosa, Los Angeles, and Goleta. A March 2025 report discusses planned suggestions for Los Angeles's ordinance. Consultation does not establish adoption.

June 2025

Network meetings and training continue

McElroy reports attending Network meetings and 69 Operation Get Smart registrants in 2025 to date, alongside 111 participants in CAMTC's separate police/code-enforcement training.

SANTA BARBARA ORDINANCE PROCESS

Nov.–Dec. 2025

Santa Barbara's proposal becomes public

The police hearing notice says the proposal incorporates CAMTC standards and adds enforcement procedures. Meetings: Nov. 14, Nov. 20, and Dec. 16. A draft dated Dec. 2 is publicly posted.

Jan.–March 2026

Review continues

The Ordinance Committee reconvenes Jan. 13. A March 16 public meeting provides another opportunity for feedback.

October 15, 2026

New Santa Barbara draft

The city publishes an updated proposed ordinance—the latest version listed on its website as of October 24, 2026.

CAMTC: Who Gets to Decide Who Can Work?

CAMTC was created under California law in 2009, but it isn't a state agency. It's a private nonprofit with the authority to certify massage therapists, approve massage schools, and deny, suspend, or revoke certifications. It doesn't regulate massage establishments themselves. That's the job of local governments.

To qualify for certification, new applicants generally need 500 hours of education at a CAMTC-approved school, fingerprinting, a background check, and payment of certification fees. CAMTC also has authority to investigate applicants' education and conduct, including consulting with police.[35]

In a city that requires CAMTC certification, a denial means you can't legally work in your profession in that city.

Who gets certified? CAMTC sued for discrimination

In June 2024, six Chinese and Thai massage therapy students sued CAMTC in Sacramento County Superior Court, alleging discrimination based on their perceived English-language abilities. According to the lawsuit, the students completed their required training but were subjected to additional English-language interviews that prevented them from obtaining certification.[36]

One plaintiff, Qian Zhang, reportedly spent $6,000 and completed more than 500 hours of training. She said CAMTC denied her certification after an informal telephone interview. Another plaintiff, Li Lin, said she had been waiting nearly a year and a half without an explanation for why she couldn't obtain her certificate (Hall, 2024; Siddiqui, 2024).[37]

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[35] California Massage Therapy Council. (n.d.). Requirements to certify. https://www.camtc.org/requirements-to-certify

[36] Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California. (2024). Civil rights organization files lawsuit claiming discrimination [Press release]. https://ajsocal.org/civil-rights-org-files-lawsuit-claiming-discrimination/

[37] Hall, E. (2024, July 29). Asian students sue California massage therapy council for discrimination over English language skills. https://www.yahoo.com/news/asian-students-sue-california-massage-123000729.html

Siddiqui, M. (2024, July 18). Students sue massage school citing discrimination. AsAmNews. https://asamnews.com/2024/07/18/language-barriers-massage-certification-denied-thai-chinese-students/

The students alleged that CAMTC singled out graduates of their school for additional interviews after concerns were raised about Chinese students speaking their native language in class.

CAMTC denied the allegations. CEO Ahmos Netanel said the council treated applicants equally regardless of race or national origin and that the additional requirements applied to graduates of a particular school because of an investigation into that institution.[38]

The allegations have not been established as findings of discrimination. But the lawsuit raises an obvious problem with giving one private organization so much control over who can work, particularly when local governments turn its supposedly voluntary certification into a legal requirement.

What California legislators found

In March 2025, staff for California's Assembly Committee on Business and Professions and Senate Committee on Business, Professions, and Economic Development reviewed CAMTC as part of the state's sunset review process.

Their 52-page background paper described the contradiction plainly: certification is voluntary under state law, but mandatory in numerous local jurisdictions, often as part of ordinances directed at prostitution and trafficking. The report noted that massage therapy has frequently been regulated as a vice problem rather than treated as a healthcare profession.[39]

Legislative staff also questioned whether massage professionals should continue to be regulated by a private nonprofit rather than a state licensing board. Unlike professionals regulated by the Department of Consumer Affairs, CAMTC certificate holders don't necessarily receive the same procedural protections available under the state's ordinary professional licensing system.

CAMTC's own website says applicants denied certification generally must wait two years before reapplying.

The Legislature had previously considered replacing CAMTC with a state licensing board. In 2025, lawmakers again reviewed the organization's governance, accountability, and

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[38] Siddiqui, M. (2024, July 18). Students sue massage school citing discrimination. AsAmNews. https://asamnews.com/2024/07/18/language-barriers-massage-certification-denied-thai-chinese-students/

[39] California Legislature, Assembly Committee on Business and Professions & Senate Committee on Business, Professions, and Economic Development. (2025, March 24). Background paper for the California Massage Therapy Council: Joint sunset review oversight hearing. https://sbp.senate.ca.gov/system/files/2025-03/5-camtc-background-paper-2025.pdf

relationship with local law enforcement. California ultimately extended CAMTC's authority rather than replacing it. The Massage Therapy Act is now scheduled to expire in 2030 unless lawmakers act again.

What this means in Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara's November 2025 proposal would require massage therapists to obtain CAMTC certification, with potential limited exceptions for some existing city permit holders. Those granted an exception would have until January 1, 2029, to meet CAMTC's certification requirements.[40]

Currently, Santa Barbara's permits require 200 hours of training. Some Santa Barbara massage workers completed 250 hour programs years ago, built careers, and have been practicing ever since. Now they could be required to return to school, pay for additional training, and obtain certification from an organization they never needed to work with before.

At the city's December 2025 hearings, massage therapists raised exactly these concerns. One longtime practitioner explained that she had trained under the earlier standard, completed additional coursework over the years, and might not even be able to obtain transcripts from her original school because its owner had died. She was 70 years old and worried about the cost of returning to school while paying Santa Barbara rents.[41]

The city has since discussed grandfathering provisions and limited exceptions.

But the basic issue hasn't changed. California doesn't require CAMTC certification to practice massage. Santa Barbara is proposing to make it a condition of massage work, placing more local workers under the authority of a private organization that has faced discrimination allegations and repeated legislative scrutiny without asking workers and businesses what they actually need.

[40] City of Santa Barbara. (2025). Notice of public hearing: Proposed changes to City of Santa Barbara massage ordinance. https://santabarbaraca.gov/sites/default/files/2025-11/NOTICE%20OF%20PUBLIC%20HEARING.pdf

[41] Ernst, M. J. (2025, December 17). Public comment regarding the proposed massage ordinance [Letter to Santa Barbara City Ordinance Committee]. https://ompnetwork.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/sites/2009/documents/final_public_comment_12-17-25.pdf

The Workers Who Are Supposed to Be Protected

Santa Barbara says its proposed massage ordinance will help prevent trafficking. But the workers and advocates who have spoken against it describe a different set of concerns: losing their livelihoods, being required to repeat expensive training, and facing more police scrutiny and potential racial profiling at work.

What Santa Barbara workers have told the city

At public hearings beginning in late 2025, longtime massage therapists asked why they should have to obtain new credentials to continue jobs they had performed legally for decades. Colin Silverman, who has operated the Deep Tissue Massage Center since 1996, told the January 13 Ordinance Committee that additional coursework would cost thousands of dollars and take him away from paying clients. He questioned what another 250 hours of basic training would teach someone who had already worked on thousands of people.[42]

At a June community meeting, Shaohong Watanabe of Little Rainbow Foot Spa described employees whose prior education might not satisfy California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTC) requirements. One had completed 250 hours of training plus coursework in Texas; another had completed 750 hours in Michigan. According to Watanabe, neither could simply rely on that training to obtain the certification the ordinance would require.[43]

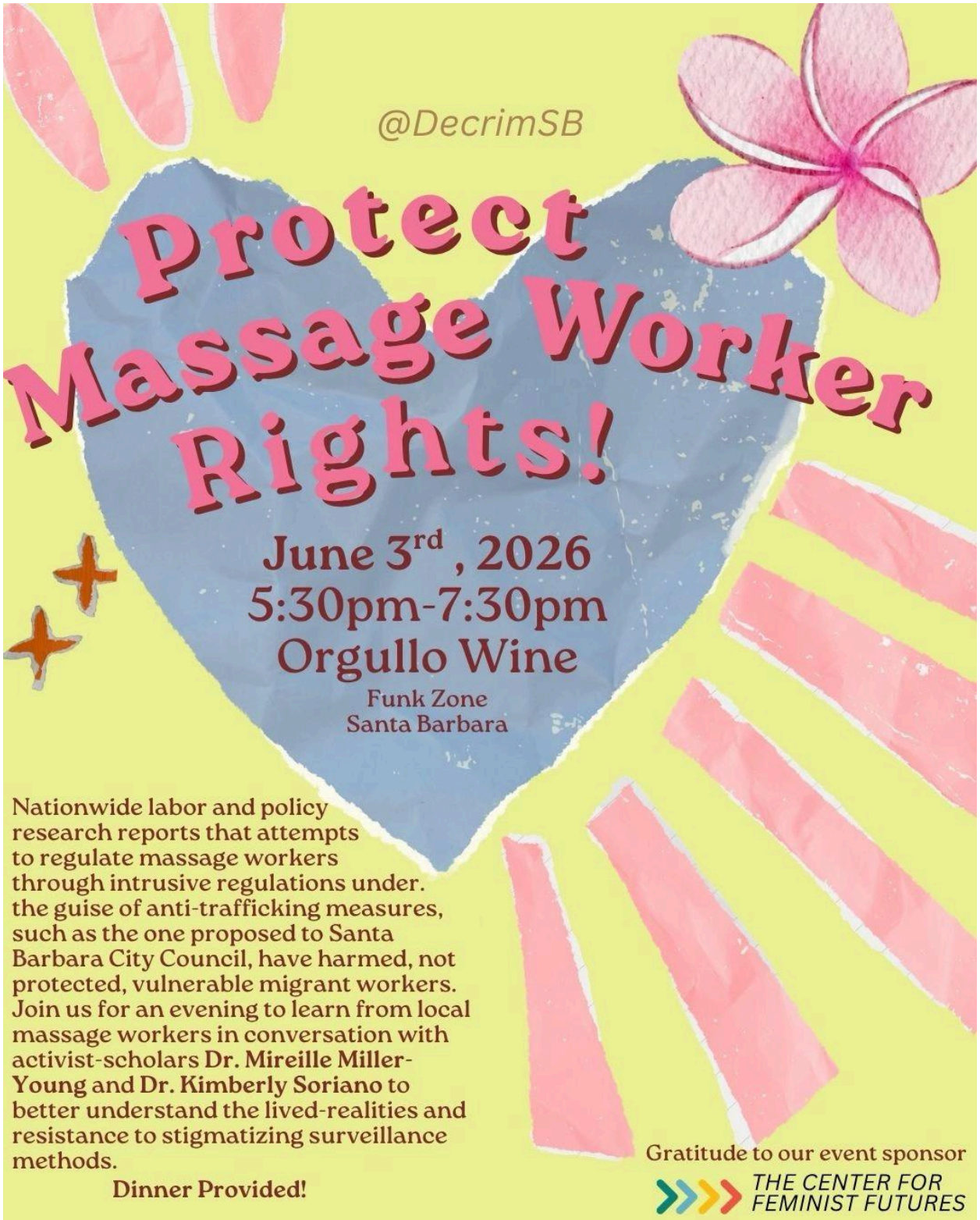
Other workers did not even know the ordinance was being considered. Sarah Vick of the 805 Immigrant Coalition told the committee that volunteers canvassing Asian massage businesses had encountered people who had not heard about the proposal. She asked for information in Chinese and Thai and meaningful access to interpretation.

By June, workers and advocates were organizing under the banner Rights Not Rescue. They challenged the premise that more inspections and stricter licensing would protect immigrant women. The city's Ordinance Committee had already directed staff to improve outreach and reconsider some requirements, but the objections continued as the proposal evolved.

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[42] City of Santa Barbara. (2026, January 13). *Ordinance Committee meeting*. https://docs.santabarbaraca.gov/OnBaseAgendaOnline/Meetings/ViewMeeting?doctype=1&id=1141

[43] Caraway, R. (2026, June 4). Massage therapists, advocates argue against city's proposed ordinance. *Noozhawk*. https://www.noozhawk.com/massage-therapists-advocates-argue-against-citys-proposed-ordinance/


@DecrimSB
Protect Massage Worker Rights!
June 3rd , 2026
5:30pm-7:30pm
Orgullo Wine
Funk Zone
Santa Barbara
Nationwide labor and policy research reports that attempts to regulate massage workers through intrusive regulations under. the guise of anti-trafficking measures, such as the one proposed to Santa Barbara City Council, have harmed, not protected, vulnerable migrant workers. Join us for an evening to learn from local massage workers in conversation with activist-scholars Dr. Mireille Miller-Young and Dr. Kimberly Soriano to better understand the lived-realities and resistance to stigmatizing surveillance methods.
Dinner Provided!
Gratitude to our event sponsor
THE CENTER FOR FEMINIST FUTURES

Who could lose the right to work?

California does not require massage therapists to hold CAMTC certification statewide. Santa Barbara proposes to make certification, or a qualifying exception, a condition of working locally. New applicants generally need 500 hours of approved education, fingerprinting, a background check, and fees.

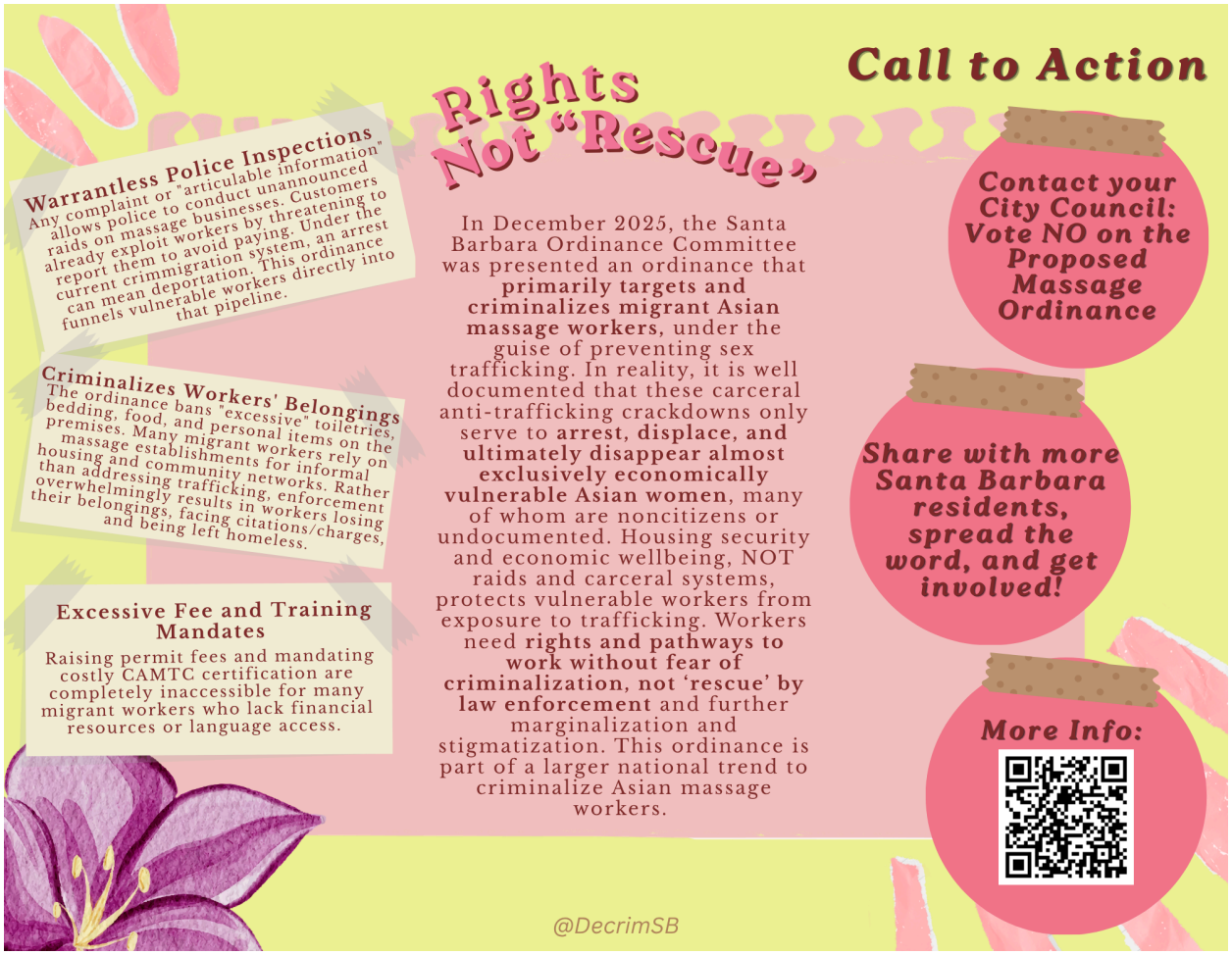
For experienced therapists who trained under earlier standards, that can mean going back to school. Tuition is only part of the cost. There is also travel, time away from clients, and the possibility that an old school has closed or records are unavailable. The city has discussed exceptions for established practitioners, but an exception is not the same as secure, portable recognition of experience.

The December 2025 proposal included a temporary exception through 2028 for certain existing workers, with restrictions that could invalidate it when a worker changed employers or workplaces. That detail is especially troubling in an ordinance justified as anti-trafficking. Being able to leave an employer and take another job is one of the most basic protections against exploitation. A credential tied to a particular workplace can make leaving harder.[44]

The city also proposed raising annual establishment permit fees from $25 to $375, and charging sole proprietors $275, although officials subsequently discussed adjustments. Those charges add to tuition, rent, insurance, and the ordinary costs of running a small business.

When a worker cannot meet a new requirement, the consequence is not simply a paperwork problem. It may be the loss of a job, a business, or the income supporting a family. The city has not shown how creating those added vulnerabilities prevents trafficking.

[44] Strauss, K., & McGrath, S. (2017). Temporary migration, precarious employment and unfree labour relations: Exploring the 'continuum of exploitation'in Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Geoforum, 78, 199-208. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718515301342



What happens when police can inspect your workplace without probable cause?

The ordinance also expands the city's authority to collect information about massage businesses and inspect them. Proposals have included employee rosters, fingerprint-based screening for some staff, and additional inspection powers. The October 15, 2026 draft authorizes up to six unannounced inspections a year without requiring a complaint or evidence of wrongdoing.[45]

Workers and clients must contend with officials entering their workplace, examining records, and looking for signs of prohibited activity. The proposed rules also restrict living or sleeping

[45] City of Santa Barbara. (2026b, October 15). *Proposed amendments to Chapter 5.76 of the Santa Barbara Municipal Code* [Draft ordinance]. https://santabarbaraca.gov/proposed-massage-ordinance-information

at a massage establishment, with personal belongings and household items potentially treated as evidence of residential use.

A suitcase, bedding, coffee pot, or rice cooker may tell an inspector that someone has been eating, drinking, and sleeping at work. It does not tell them whether anyone is being trafficked. For workers who travel between jobs, the distinction is important.

Immigrant advocates have warned that expanded police contact and fingerprinting could make workers afraid of arrest, being profiled for immigration consequences, or information-sharing, even when they have done nothing wrong.[46] Those concerns should not be confused with proof that the ordinance automatically triggers immigration enforcement. They are reasons workers may avoid police.

That avoidance has safety consequences. In a survey of 61 Asian migrant holistic practitioners in Toronto, Butterfly found that nearly half had experienced workplace violence, while 62.2 percent reported being less likely to seek police help. Nearly two-thirds worried about police inspections and raids.[47] The findings expose a problem with the ordinance's strategy of using police: it's hard for police to find victims who are afraid of them.

What workers themselves say makes them safer

In *Un-Licensed*, Red Canary Song, the Massage Parlor Outreach Project, and Butterfly documented how licensing requirements and police enforcement affect Asian migrant massage workers. Training costs, language barriers, inaccessible credentials, fines, and closures can push workers out of legal employment without establishing that anyone has been trafficked (Red Canary Song et al., 2022).[48]

These organizations emphasize peer outreach, practical assistance, and workers' ability to make decisions about their own lives. Safety can mean having somewhere to live, enough money to leave a dangerous job, access to healthcare, reliable information in one's language, and a way to report violence without risking arrest or deportation.

Santa Barbara's ordinance is primarily a system for screening, inspecting, surveilling, and penalizing businesses. It does not itself provide emergency income, housing, confidential worker-led reporting, or protection against retaliation. Other local programs may offer some

[46] Caraway, R. (2025, December 18). Massage therapists speak out against Santa Barbara's proposed rules, fee increases. *Noozhawk*. https://www.noozhawk.com/massage-therapists-speak-out-against-santa-barbaras-proposed-rules-fee-increases/

[47] Lam, E. (2018, May). Survey on Toronto holistic practitioners' experiences with bylaw enforcement and police. Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network).

[48] Red Canary Song, Massage Parlor Outreach Project, & Butterfly. (2022, February). Un-licensed: Asian migrant massage licensure and the racialized policing of poverty

assistance, but those are not substitutes for showing how this ordinance meets workers' stated needs.

Sex workers' rights are not a separate issue

Some massage workers sell sexual services. Some sex workers sell massage services. Some don't. Some are trafficking survivors. Some have experienced violence or exploitation. None should have to prove they do not provide sexual services to deserve equal protection under the law.

When police target Asian massage businesses, the defense is often to deny that the women there are sex workers. Who cares if they are sex workers? Having consensual adult sex that some people disapprove of does not justify violating constitutional or human rights to work, privacy, dignity, equal protection under the law, and due process.

This matters when a worker is being threatened or forced to work. If asking police for help could mean arrest, losing a job, or facing immigration consequences, she won’t call. That gives abusive employers and violent customers more power.

Closing a workplace does not help. Losing income makes it harder to pay rent, feed a family, get away from someone who is hurting you, or thrive.

Santa Barbara's proposal gives officials more ways to investigate massage workers and close their workplaces. It does not give workers corresponding protections when they report abuse or need to leave an unsafe situation.

If the city wants to protect massage workers, it should make it easier for them to get help without risking everything they have.

What Would Actually Protect Massage Workers?

Santa Barbara still hasn't answered the most basic question: what would actually make massage workers safer?

The city has proposed more inspections, stricter credentialing, higher fees, heightened surveillance, and expanded authority to deny or revoke business permits. Those measures might make it easier to identify regulatory violations or close businesses, but they do not protect workers.

Police keep treating prostitution, trafficking, and unsafe working conditions like they're the same thing. This lazy investigative approach puts a target on everyone while affording copious police discretion and allowing the state and private industries to further extract and profit from migrant and feminized labor.

What problems have actually been documented?

Santa Barbara police have described complaints about massage businesses, including allegations of prostitution and code violations. But the records ESPLER obtained do not establish a pattern of sex trafficking in the city's massage establishments.

That doesn't mean trafficking never happens. It means the city has not demonstrated that the problem it claims to be addressing exists.

There are several different issues here, and treating them as interchangeable makes it difficult to evaluate the ordinance.

Sex trafficking involves force, fraud, or coercion in adult commercial sex, or commercial sexual exploitation of minors. Workers may be threatened, controlled, deprived of earnings, or prevented from leaving. Those are serious abuses that require investigation and protection.

Workplace violence and labor exploitation can occur with or without trafficking. Workers may experience assault, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, or threats from employers and customers. These problems deserve attention whether or not they meet the legal definition of trafficking.

Housing insecurity is another concern. Someone sleeping at work may be experiencing coercion. She may also be trying to save money or have nowhere else to stay. Finding bedding or a suitcase doesn't tell police which explanation is correct - and neither should be justification for a prostitution arrest.

Consensual adult sex work is not trafficking. The presence of commercial sex does not establish that someone is being forced to work or needs to be “rescued” via arrest in a prostitution sting or lose their livelihood.

A worker experiencing violence may need emergency protection. Someone whose employer is withholding wages may need help recovering their wages, not being deported. A trafficking survivor may need housing, legal assistance, and protection from retaliation. Someone selling sex voluntarily may need the same protections against violence and exploitation that other workers receive.

Santa Barbara has not shown that more massage business inspections will reliably identify those different circumstances - instead, it all becomes “illicit” and livelihoods are lost.

What workers need to report abuse and leave unsafe conditions

Organizations led by Asian migrant massage workers have been explaining these needs for years.

Red Canary Song, Butterfly, and the Massage Parlor Outreach Project have documented how police enforcement, licensing restrictions, and immigration concerns can make workers less willing or able to seek assistance. Their research emphasizes access to resources, labor rights, and the ability to make decisions without being punished for the work they do (Red Canary Song et al., 2022).

A worker who is being abused needs a way to report it without risking arrest for prostitution or losing her livelihood. She needs to know that asking for help will not automatically expose her to economic uncertainty and immigration enforcement. She may need somewhere to go.

That means confidential reporting, access to interpreters, immigration legal assistance, emergency housing, and financial support. It also means meaningful protection against retaliation by employers, family, police, or customers.

Workers need the ability to change jobs without losing their professional credentials. They need access to labor protections and a way to negotiate for their own labor and safe work conditions. They need to be able to organize with one another without being treated as suspects.

Red Canary Song's work includes peer outreach, mutual aid, healthcare access, and organizing with migrant massage workers. These approaches help workers obtain assistance without requiring them to participate in a police investigation or identify themselves as trafficking victims. Protecting people from exploitation means increasing their ability to make choices. People are safer when they have more options, not less.

Does Santa Barbara's ordinance provide those protections?

Santa Barbara's proposed ordinance does not create a confidential reporting system for workers experiencing abuse. It does not provide emergency housing, housing assistance, financial assistance, immigration representation, or protection against retaliation. Nor does it remove the risk of prostitution enforcement for workers who report violence.

Instead, it focuses on certification, background checks, employee records, inspections, and permit enforcement.

Some provisions address legitimate regulatory concerns. Sanitation requirements, safe facilities, and appropriate professional standards can benefit workers and customers. But those requirements should be evaluated on their own merits, not treated as evidence of trafficking prevention.

The city's proposed inspection checklist goes well beyond cleanliness and sanitation. It directs inspectors to examine professional credentials, employee rosters, and evidence of living quarters or cooking facilities (City of Santa Barbara, 2026).

The October 15 ordinance draft also provides for repeated unannounced inspections. Whatever the legal limits on those inspections, the city has not demonstrated that increasing police access to massage workplaces will make workers more willing to report abuse.

The certification requirement presents a similar problem. Experienced workers could be required to obtain additional education and approval from CAMTC to continue working. Those unable to satisfy the requirements could lose their jobs.

A worker who loses her income is not safer. A worker who fears police or immigration consequences is not more likely to report exploitation. Closing a business does not mean that anyone has been rescued.

Santa Barbara lawmakers should reject this ordinance and consult with local massage workers rather than the police and regulators who seek more power over them.

The city should also publish meaningful information about enforcement outcomes. How many inspections identify actual trafficking? Have there been any sex trafficking cases at massage businesses? How many workers receive assistance? How many businesses close, and what happens to their employees afterward?

Conclusion: Who Is Being Protected?

Santa Barbara police want more power to surveil massage businesses, investigate workers, and revoke permits. They say these powers are needed to prevent prostitution and human trafficking, but they haven't produced evidence of a trafficking problem or prostitution in the city's massage establishments.

The proposed ordinance looks remarkably similar to the regulatory strategies CAMTC and The Network have been promoting around the country that target Asian businesses.

Meanwhile, massage therapists have been telling the city what the ordinance would mean for them. Experienced workers could be forced back to school or out of their professions. Businesses could face repeated police inspections, and workers who already have reasons to fear law enforcement could become even less willing to report violence or exploitation.

If Santa Barbara is concerned about trafficking, it should start by listening to the people it claims to be protecting. Workers need to be able to report abuse, leave dangerous situations, and support themselves without risking arrest, deportation, or the loss of their livelihoods. The city could spend its time and resources addressing those needs instead of shutting down Asian-owned businesses and putting Asian workers out of work.

The People Behind The Report

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