The Fresno Bee

CRIME

‘Human trafficking will not be tolerated.’ Fresno police arrest massage parlor clients

BY CARMEN GEORGE

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Fifteen men were arrested on suspicion of soliciting prostitution at a Fresno massage parlor during an undercover operation that police called the first of its kind in the city.

Another three individuals, employees at Angel Massage, located at 3636 N. First St., near Shields Avenue in central Fresno, were arrested Wednesday for residing in a house of prostitution, Sgt. Sean Biggs said. Police also helped connect the arrested women with organizations working to help victims of human trafficking.

Biggs said the operation was the first of its kind in Fresno in terms of focusing on arresting clients at a massage parlor. He said the “supply side” of the commercial sex trade wouldn’t be so prevalent if there wasn’t a demand.

“The primary focus of the operation was on the ‘demand’ side of prostitution,” Biggs said, “targeting those individuals coming into the establishment looking to pay for sex.”

Biggs said most of the victims police find in Fresno massage parlors are from China and speak Mandarin.

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“No one chooses to be a prostitute or a victim of human trafficking,” Biggs said. “These individuals find themselves in different situations, and it’s usually brought about by force, fear or coercion.”

Biggs said law enforcement had not yet been in contact with the owners of Angel Massage, who were not named. He said they will be cited and informed their permit to run a massage parlor is being revoked. That decision can be appealed.

The undercover operation was carried out by Fresno police’s Vice Unit and FBI agents. It followed an investigation prompted by an anonymous tip made last year. Law enforcement served a search warrant, closed the parlor and collected needed evidence for a pending criminal case against the establishment.

During the closure, law enforcement conducted a “reverse” operation – reopening the business with undercover officers posing as workers involved in the sex trade.

Nineteen men were detained for soliciting an undercover officer for sex acts in exchange for money. Fifteen were arrested, and two of the cases will be submitted to the Fresno County District Attorney's Office.

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The operation was in conjunction with a larger effort involving law enforcement agencies across California.

"Now in its fifth year, 'Operation Reclaim and Rebuild' emphasizes a unified, regional approach and sends a clear message that human trafficking will not be tolerated in Fresno," Biggs said. "January is also Human Trafficking Awareness Month which brings awareness to a widespread form of modern day slavery.

"Human trafficking is a crime that involves the exploitation of a person for the purpose of compelled labor or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, fraud or coercion."

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