

Testimony of Raymond Bechard
Connecticut General Assembly Committee on the Judiciary
Public Hearing – March 14, 2016
HB 5052, HB 5621, HB 5623

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, members of the Committee, my name is Raymond Bechard. I am here to provide important information regarding HB05052 - AN ACT STRENGTHENING PROTECTIONS FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING, HB05621 - AN ACT CONCERNING HUMAN TRAFFICKING and HB05623 - AN ACT CONCERNING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

As an author and advocate focusing on human rights and, more specifically, human trafficking, I have written three books on the topic, including "The Berlin Turnpike: A True Story of Human Trafficking in America," which is a close examination of sex trafficking in the United States as seen through the landmark federal trial of US vs. Dennis Paris, which took place in Hartford in June of 2007. Dennis Paris was convicted of sex trafficking of minors, having sold out girls as young as 14 years old in the Hartford area. This case led to changes in Connecticut law including the limitation of "escort" advertisements in print publications like the "Hartford Advocate," which ceased publication of such ads weeks after the law was enacted in 2012. That publication no longer exists.

But this was by no means the end of the Dennis Paris story. In November, 2011, Jaykuan Paris, Dennis's brother, was arrested for promoting prostitution in New Britain. Six months later, his partner in the sex trade, Pearl Kelly-Paris, also Jaykuan's wife, was also arrested for the very same crimes. However, Pearl had another job at the time. She was a Connecticut State Police Trooper. While their human trafficking crimes against their victims were arguably more violent than those of Dennis Paris, both Jaykuan and State Trooper Pearl Kelly-Paris were charged the lesser state offenses of promoting prostitution. Dennis Paris is serving a 30 year sentence in Federal Prison. Jaykuan Paris is due to be released this May. Pearl never served any time, having been given a suspended sentence.

This little known case was the impetus leading to comprehensive reforms to Connecticut's human trafficking laws in 2013 which changed the very definition of human trafficking to mirror that of federal law, increased penalties for offenders, provided greater protection and services for victims and called for expanded training for service providers. This standing law also requires that signage be placed in certain commercial establishments providing information directly to potential human trafficking victims. This signage is meant to reach these victims with phone numbers, emergency contact information, victims' rights, and instructions for getting help in multiple languages.

While the current Governor's Bill, HB 5052, wisely increases the legal net whereby trafficking offenders may be prosecuted, it falls drastically short of the myriad of changes needed in Connecticut's trafficking laws. Consequently, I urge the committee to focus on HB 5623 and 5621, the latter of which offers far more comprehensive provisions to protect victims.

I am especially encouraged by the provisions of HB 5621 that increase the age of minors to 18, thereby mirroring the more stringent and effective federal human trafficking laws, which was our intention with the aforementioned comprehensive Connecticut law passed in 2013 (Public Act No. 13-166 AN ACT CONCERNING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS.) I am also encouraged by the elimination "of the requirement that a person knew the victim was under eighteen years of age or was a victim of coercion or human trafficking in order to be convicted of a class C felony for patronizing a prostitute." This takes away any legal defense of a person guilty of "paid pedophilia."

Further, HB 5621 addresses a heretofore unseen problem in Public Act No. 13-166 AN ACT CONCERNING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS passed in 2013, specifically, the provision meant to expand the previously mentioned requirements for the display of notice concerning services available to victims of human trafficking.

The current law states "The provisions of subsection (a) of this section shall not apply to any person who holds an on-premises consumption permit for the retail sale of alcoholic liquor pursuant to title 30 that consists of only one or more of the following:" The second of these exemptions states "a restaurant permit, restaurant permit for beer, restaurant permit for wine and beer or cafe permit."

This exemption renders the signage requirement virtually useless as every adult entertainment establishment in Connecticut, also known as strip clubs, has a kitchen or café license.

I know this because my co-author, Holly Havens, and I visited each of these 33 establishments in Connecticut and asked the managers if they were displaying the signs. Not only did none of them display the sign, not one knew of the law requiring the signs be posted. However, it's not their fault. The law as it stands now exempts any of these businesses from displaying the sign because they also serve food and have a license to do so.

The exemption also applies to hotels and casinos which hold "restaurant" permits. No such signage is posted in these establishments, locations where human trafficking is most likely to take place, simply because they serve food.

This oversight in the existing law puts victims at risk by preventing them from accessing information which could save their lives. I urge you, for their sakes, to remove this dangerous exemption from current law by passage of the bill.

Further, I strongly urge you to include unlicensed "Massage Parlors," in the group of businesses required to post this signage. There are 140 such establishments in Connecticut and many of them harbor and abuse victims of human trafficking, most of whom do not speak English. Therefore, I finally urge caution in determining the languages and dialects used when developing these signs.

Thank you.