Law enforcement and health officials have concerns about 'bodywork' businesses

The ads show pictures of young Asian women in bras and provocative poses, and promise relaxing "bodywork" in private rooms.

Authorities say many of these businesses, popping up in MetroWest and around the state, are fronts for prostitution and sex trafficking, but a regulatory loophole makes it challenging for law enforcement to stop them.

"It's a crime that happens pretty much in secret," said Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan.

Looking for a tool to help police, Framingham is the latest municipality writing regulations to close the loophole at the state level and require practitioners of bodywork - which is different from traditional massage - to register with the local Board of Health. The new rules would allow for unannounced inspections, prohibit sexual activity and provocative advertising and require therapists to have certifications, documentation and to be "properly clothed."

Framingham Police Detective Sgt. Tim O'Toole, who came to the Board of Health asking for help, said he knows of about 10 bodywork businesses in town.

O'Toole, who heads up his department's street crimes unit, said a lot of the Asian female workers are being trafficked in from New York, and police have information that they are performing sexual acts here for fees.

"There are websites that rate these women," he said.

A recent check of classified ad websites Craigslist and Backpage found a number of businesses advertising, for example, "BEST Asian Pleasure" and "New Faces Today" in Framingham and across MetroWest.

Westborough Police Chief Alan Gordon said he was concerned to hear an "Asian bodywork" business, Lucky Star Body Works, is advertising its grand opening in an office building at 2a South St. in his town.

The service, provided by "experienced new Asian" staff, costs $60 an hour and includes a "free shower." The ad on Backpage states, "We're confident you'll be back for more..."

Gordon said his department went after one such business a couple years ago after a woman came to police, upset her husband was spending his paycheck on so-called "bodywork."

The case was a challenge for police: "Unfortunately, there was a loophole in the law," Gordon said.

"We ended up just doing a surveillance on the business and interacting with the people that were leaving," Gordon said. In the end, "the landlord actually evicted them," he said.

Pete Fullerton, spokesman for the state Department of Professional Licensure, which regulates massage, said his agency is well aware of the gray area for bodywork and those illegitimate businesses that say they practice it.

"It's definitely something that's on our radar," he said.

The practice of such specialties as reflexology, acupressure, reiki and "Asian Bodywork Therapy that does not constitute massage" are exempt from the state's stringent massage therapy regulations, and such businesses cannot advertise that they provide massage.

Fullerton said his agency is now reviewing all its regulations, under an executive order by Gov. Charlie Baker, and may decide to request a change in the statute, Fullerton said.

"We want to protect consumers and Massachusetts businesses that are legitimate," Fullerton said. "It's definitely something that we're looking at."

The Massachusetts Attorney General's Office filed and advocated for the new human trafficking law in 2012, establishing the state crimes of human trafficking for sexual servitude and human trafficking for forced labor.

Ryan said the industry generates about $32 billion a year and it's usually women, but sometimes men, who are compelled to perform sex acts.

"It's really about money," Ryan said. "And it's about — what we've often seen — is people who have fallen into this work and are being forced in some way, physically or emotionally to engage in it."

O'Toole said police are investigating bodywork businesses in Framingham, but believe the Board of Health regulations will be effective in rooting out the illegitimate ones.
Law enforcement and health officials have concerns about "bodywork" businesses - Gate House

"We prefer to go this route at this time, shutting these places down and letting them know this isn't the community they're going to be able to set these shops up in," he said.

Gordon said his detectives openly videotaped the comings and goings at the former bodywork business in Westborough.

Going undercover and investigating these places can be challenging for police, he said.

"Our hands are tied," Gordon said. "It's very hard, especially in a small community. Everybody knows everybody."

In 2014, Framingham Police said they caught Framingham fire inspector Todd Young soliciting a sexual favor from an Asian massage parlor on Union Avenue. Authorities said he went into the business in uniform and asked for free "body work" in exchange for not fining the business for a fire code violation.

Police, who were doing a stakeout, said they watched Young enter and leave 30 minutes later, and he admitted to receiving prostitution services.

Young resigned from his job and pleaded not guilty in April 2014 to felony corruption charges. The DA's office said a judge in October sentenced Young to 12 years of probation and continued the case without a finding.

Police said the women at that business were living there.

O'Toole said police monitored body work ads on Craigslist and Backpage, and see only men leaving the businesses.

He said the sexually suggestive ads and services are not "what you see in a typical massage parlor being offered."

One recent listing under the "body rubs" section on Backpage advertised a "full body bodywork" spa in Framingham with "real sexy Asian girls."

"We'll take care of you as the KING," read the ad, which included a photo of a young Asian woman posing demurely in a bra.

The ad didn't list a street address, but the phone number matched the number listed in a different ad, this one less sexually explicit, for a bodywork business at 873 Concord St.

Local attorney Steve Meltzer, who owns the property at 873 Concord St., said he rents office space above his law practice to a business called Ruby Spa, but it hasn't drawn his suspicion.

"Obviously if we had any verifiable information that anything nefarious was going on, we would do something about it, but we don't and so we can't," Meltzer said.

Just up the street from the police station and town hall, Naomi Spa, at 158 Union Ave., has a simple sign and near "Open" sign in the window, but all the shades are drawn.

There are security cameras just inside the door and customers must hit the buzzer to enter.

An Asian woman in a black dress who answered the door on a recent afternoon said she didn't speak English.

"Boss in New York," she said.

Marissa Garofano, Framingham's chief of community health, said regulations would help police see what's going on in these businesses.

"It's really tough for them to regulate these establishments because it would require them going in and putting themselves in a very vulnerable position to confirm if sexual activities were offered and available," Garofano said. "Where the Board of Health comes in is we're able to regulate these establishments to make sure that they meet certain sanitary conditions, that people have proper permits and identification, to make sure that the public is going to a safe place."

The Framingham Board of Health is scheduled to hold a public hearing and may vote on its bodywork regulations on Aug. 24.

"I think these regulations are going to be really beneficial for the town in keeping all the residents in the town safe," Garofano said, "and as well as making sure that our town is not allowing human trafficking or women to be used for anything against their will."

Framingham is basing its bodywork regulations on ones Arlington enacted in 2013.

Jim Feeney, Arlington's acting director of health and human services, said his town had about 10 bodywork businesses and believed they were fronts for criminal enterprise.

Once the regulations were on the books, Feeney said he visited the shops with police and the state Department of Public Licensure, taking a multi-jurisdictional approach to enforcement.

"I only was able to permit one therapist initially," Feeney said. "It was alarming how many therapists we had practicing in our community that had absolutely zero education or training."

Like Framingham proposes to do, Arlington required a birth certificate and high school diploma or the equivalent for each practitioner, Criminal Offender Record Information and Sex Offender Registry information screenings and proof of liability insurance, and certification from a nationally certified membership organization.

In Marlborough, nationally board certified massage therapist Paul Whittier said he has concerns about the lack of regulations for people practicing bodywork.

Whittier, who owns Elements of Bodywork, offers traditional services such as deep tissue, hot stone and Swedish massage, as well as body scrubs and wraps, which he calls bodywork.

Whittier said traditional massage is technically a subset of the broader category of "bodywork." He said the bodywork services he provides include sea salt or sugar-based body scrubs to remove dry skin, and an anti-cellulite wrap.

"It's things you would typically find in almost all spas," he said.

As a licensed massage therapist, Whittier said he needed 650 hours of training for the state and 750 hours to achieve national certification.

Whittier, in business for 10 years, knows the term "bodywork" can be confusing.

"Some people call and think I actually do auto-body work, so there has been some confusion," he said.

According to the definition in Framingham’s draft regulations, bodywork is the practice of a person using primarily touch to manipulate tissue, which doesn’t constitute the state’s definition of massage, to provide treatment or therapy.

Ryan, the district attorney, said she’s glad to see Framingham working on its regulations.

She said her office has been working on the human trafficking problem for a long time, including by training first responders, ESL and citizenship tutors and clergy serving immigrant and refugee communities to recognize the signs.

“One of the problems with these cases is no one usually comes forward and says I’m the victim of trafficking,” she said.

A Framingham nonprofit formed last year called RIA House – Ready.Inspire.Act, works to raise awareness and money to help victims of sex trafficking, slavery and exploitation.

Founder and managing director Heather Wightman, of Hopkinton, said a new grant is allowing the nonprofit to hire two regional managers for MetroWest and Central Massachusetts to do outreach to help victims, including those doing bodywork.

“Wherever there’s little oversight and low wages, all of those sorts of things, I think you have the potential for exploitation and that could be either labor or sex,” Wightman said, “and in this case we’re talking about potentially both.”

Danielle Ameden can be reached at 508-526-4416 or dameden@wickedlocal.com. Follow her on Twitter @damedenMW.