

Human trafficking may be on the rise in North Carolina

Some N.C. agencies that assist immigrants say they believe the crime is growing.

By Greg Lacour

glacour@charlotteobserver.com

Human trafficking, which a Union County woman was charged with over the weekend, appears to be a growing problem in North Carolina, say experts who track such cases.

A handful of agencies that offer assistance to immigrants have tracked the relatively recent phenomenon over the last several years. Specific evidence is rare for the same reasons law enforcement has a hard time finding violators: Victims tend to be recent immigrants who don't speak English and know little to nothing about the American justice system.

"We don't have good statistics on it. But my sense is that it's growing," said **Jennifer Stuart**, a staff attorney for **Legal Aid of North Carolina**. "We're seeing more cases."

Over the weekend, Monroe police made three arrests and shut down a business in what they believe is a case of human trafficking involving at least two women selling sex at a massage parlor.

Son Jarkowsky, 40, was released on bond Sunday from the Union County jail. Monroe police had arrested her Saturday, charging her with trafficking people and allowing her business to be used for prostitution.

The city has closed Jarkowsky's business, Island Spa on U.S. 74 West between Monroe and Indian Trail, and also charged two employees, Min Ye and Dan Sim Kim, both 47, with misdemeanors. They bonded out of jail and are scheduled to appear in District Court on Sept. 4.

Ye is Chinese. Kim is South Korean. Neither speaks the other's language, and both speak "very broken English," making it hard for them to seek help, said police Sgt. T.J. Goforth, the case's lead investigator.

Island Spa opened in late 2007, offering half-hour massages for \$60; an hour cost \$80. Police began monitoring the red-brick parlor on April 1, staking out the parking lot and sending undercover officers inside, police said.

Customers found advertisements on Craigslist, the popular free online classified advertising forum, and male customers came from hundreds of miles away, police said. One ad for the parlor remained on the site Monday, offering "HOT Stone and Suana (sic) Massage" and an invitation to "Come to the Island relax."

Authorities said they were trying to get counseling for the employees, which is hard to come by. Only recently have agencies begun to even offer services to victims of trafficking, who seldom know resources are even there, Stuart said.

Legal Aid runs a program, the **Battered Immigrant Project**, that offers assistance to immigrant victims of domestic abuse and human trafficking. The program receives most of its referrals from domestic violence shelters, law enforcement and churches, and **Stuart** said the number of referrals has "definitely increased" in the last few months.

She said she doesn't know whether human trafficking or just awareness of the problem is rising. But North Carolina is becoming an attractive state for traffickers because of its growing population and the availability of farm work, **Stuart** said.



Son Jarkowsky

Human trafficking has been a state crime in North Carolina for less than two years. The General Assembly passed laws in 2006 criminalizing forced labor, either for sexual or other services. It was only a federal crime before then.

A statewide task force that tries to shelter victims offers help with temporary visas until they can sort out their immigration status, which can take months, said **N.C. Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, D-Orange**, who sponsored the bills. She was distressed to learn that the two Island Spa employees had been charged.

"They're not prostitutes ... that's a chosen act," Kinnaird said. "These people do not have a choice."

Investigators believe Ye and Kim were the victims in the case, "but they still violated state law and city ordinance," Goforth said. The district attorney's office, she said, can decide to drop the charges.

Greg Lacour: 704-358-5067