

County amends ordinance to target illegal massage parlors

By Catherine Dominguez, cdominguez@hcnonline.com Published 8:55 pm, Tuesday, May 9, 2017



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Special Crimes Bureau Chief Tyler Dunman with the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office speaks during a recent Commissioners Court meeting.

The Montgomery County Attorney's Office and the District Attorney's Office are taking aim at regulations regarding sexually oriented business to help combat sex trafficking.

And county commissioners responded Tuesday by unanimously approving changes to the county ordinance that would allow law enforcement and the DA's Office to target the owners of illegally operated massage parlors.

According to Assistant County Attorney Amy Dunham, the county's ordinance on sexually oriented businesses has not been updated since 1997. "When it was originally drafted, the court was really focused on strip clubs, adult book stores and things like that," she said. "Over the past few years, there have been legislative changes and a change in the focus of law enforcement which is human trafficking." Surrounding counties, Dunham said, are updating ordinances to address massage parlors.

Tyler Dunman, chief of special crimes bureau with the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, said there has been an influx of massage parlors as a front for sex trafficking in Montgomery County. "The women that are forced to work in these facilities are under duress or threat back in their home country and have been brought here and told misinformation," he said. "So it becomes a human-trafficking ring."

He said currently, the women often are arrested and charged with prostitution but the businesses are usually back up and running just days later. The revisions of the ordinance, he added, would allow law enforcement to target and go after the business owners.

The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office has identified up to 50 businesses that have ties to sexually oriented services and even advertise those services. "They advertise what is happening at these places, and it isn't massaging," Dunman said. "We want to use this as a

tool both as the DA's Office and law enforcement, and frankly the County Attorney's Office. It allows criminal prosecution and (hits) them in the pocketbook to shut them down."

MCSO Lt. Tim Cannon said Montgomery County is "behind the eight-ball." "We are seeing more of these pop up in strip centers than Starbucks," he said. "We knew we had this influx, but how were we going to address it?" In the past, Cannon said, law enforcement used undercover operations to shut the illegal businesses down but added that put officers in a dangerous situation. "It's going to add another tool for our tool belt," he said.

Some commissioners appeared surprised to hear about the number of possible sexually oriented businesses in their precincts. "Are there any legally operated massage parlors in Montgomery County," Precinct 2 Commissioner Charlie Riley asked. Cannon said yes and those are not the ones targeted by the ordinance.