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Vegas Could Shine Image by Fighting Human Trafficking, Epidemic Made Worse by Covid-19

By Robert Weiner and Zach Filtz

Hotels give a "Wink and a Nod" When Millions of Young Girls' Lives at Stake

Las Vegas could shine its image and lead the nation in fighting human trafficking, a situation made even worse with Coronavirus (Covid-19). Hotel chains have shown that a wink and a nod are just fine with them, enabling of the destruction of young girls' lives. Ignoring the need to contain it, they are not revealing information regarding their customers and clients interacting with COVID-19-positive people. Now, researchers in China according to WebMD had found that Coronavirus can be prevalent in semen in men who are still infected or recovering from COVID-19, with findings published in the medical journal JAMA Network Open.

While Las Vegas already makes prostitution unlawful, the state of Nevada lets the counties choose to outlaw it. Currently, there are six counties and a city where prostitution is not legal at all: Clark County (which contains Las Vegas), Douglas, Eureka, Lincoln, Pershing, Washoe (contains Reno) and the independent city of Carson City (the state capitol). However, Elko, Humboldt, Lyon, and White Pine Counties all allow brothels in at least parts of their counties. We need sunlight shown on this dark issue, and question why this is not a statewide prohibition.

Legal sex worker and brothel employee Sandi Benks said to the Reno Gazette Journal that the COVID-19 illness caused her enough worry to stop working in the industry since Nevada shut down brothels on March 19 in the Covid regulations. "I had a gut feeling and I just packed up and left," Benks said. "I bailed on it. I wasn't comfortable. I knew nationally we weren't supposed to be in groups over 10 and I was like this is a group over 10 - I'm outta here. I'm a stickler on that. I'd rather play safe than sorry." The implications for this legal sex worker is that she, as a legal sex worker, has a choice in the matter is as different as night and day, as it is still believed that illegal traffickers are still forcing their "property" to continue performing sexual services to their black-market customers, are a very different story. Those people - the unseen victims kept by a force in a clandestine industry - can't say no unless they safely get help.

For those who are struggling to grasp the experiences of human trafficking survivors, Reno NBC News Channel 4's website encapsulates this horror with "Lisa" (her identity kept a secret). She explains that she was homeless at 12, stripping at 16, and was forced into trafficking soon after that. Lisa says one night she was asked to a friend's

house, and that's where five men met her, drugged and beat her and held her for four days. That is where her sex trafficking started in the Reno, Nevada area.

According to the Polaris Project, Nevada ranks as the #2 state for human trafficking cases per capita at 9.97 victims per 100,000 citizens - a very unfavorable to be so highly ranked. According to Polaris, human trafficking and particularly sex trafficking occurs in every state as well as Washington, D.C. Human trafficking is actually the worst in Washington, D.C. (must be lists of politicians in many black books), but Nevada is #1 among the states. Statistics from the Polaris Project as the largest and most comprehensive data and advocacy center documents 11,000 cases of human trafficking and 23,000 individual survivors.

In 2018, Nevada experienced 313 cases of human trafficking - federal law defines the term that can be defined as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to lure a person to be taken into captivity for commercial labor or sex purposes without their family or friends knowing. Las Vegas itself saw 264 of all human trafficking cases. We need to shed more light onto this dark issue but most importantly, reduce the occurrences.

There is some hope in the form of a likely settlement to ending some of this wink-and-nod: victims have begun to fight back against the powerful hotel companies that have long covered up heinous sexual crimes happening behind closed doors. They are no longer tolerating passive "cooperation" with their traffickers.

Victims are being represented in two separate federal suits, as well as a current motion to consolidate cases from 21 states. The first of the two federal suits, filed in U.S. District Court in the District of New Hampshire, lists InterContinental Hotels Group, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, Best Western International, and Marriott International as the defendants, and a victim identified as "K.B." as the plaintiff. The second federal suit was filed in the U.S. District Court in the Northern District of Texas against defendants Best Western International, Hyatt Hotels Corp., and Red Lion Hotels Corp.

A motion in federal court in Ohio by New York law firm Weitz and Luxenberg to consolidate 21 multi-district cases currently include the states Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington state, and Nevada. Victims from other states could be included in this class action suit, according to the law firm. The defendants for the state cases include Choice Hotels, Extended Stay America, and Hilton, and even smaller hotels and motels as well. Overall, the wink-and-nodding reads like a who's who of the hotel industry. So far, 1,500 victims have retained counsel, and 7,000 victims could be represented in the suit over time, according to Weitz and Luxenberg.

How closely are hotels and sex trafficking linked? Polaris reports *74% of all trafficking victims report that hotels were used* at some point while they were being trafficked. This includes locations where the activities are supposedly illegal.

How can the inhumane, exploitative crime of human trafficking exist in a country where there so many citizens and so many methods of calling for help? The clandestine nature of human trafficking makes it difficult for advocates to determine a ballpark range of incidents per year, but it is at least in the "thousands" according to Polaris.

Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), back in the news after his endorsement of Joe Biden for President, called his home state legislature "a bunch of cowards" after they failed to decriminalize prostitution for the whole state. For as much good as Reid has done for the state and nation, this is exactly the wrong direction to go.

Polaris, establisher of the National Human Trafficking Hotline identifies this list of suspicious signs of human trafficking:

- Presence of a third party (pimp/trafficker) appearing to be monitoring a hallway or door
- Guest is overly concerned with surveillance cameras or entrance policies
- Someone is dropped off and visits for 30 minutes - 1 hour only - or someone waits for that person on property or in the parking lot
- Abandoned or locked out young adults on property

- Sales flyers left behind that detail suspicious magazine sales tactics

There is real opportunity for change here - hotel chains don't need to continue the winking-and-nodding. It is time for all hotel chains -- as well as lesser known and smaller hotels -- to introduce strict policies for their hotels for identifying and stopping suspected sex trafficking going on in their rooms. We hope there is oversight against giving such locations PPP's -- payroll protection from Congress-- for allowing human trafficking. As for bystanders who may come into contact with traffickers, turning a blind eye cannot be an option. It's time for justice to run its course, and for Nevada to be a national model in reform against enabling of prostitution and modern-day slavery. Call the local authorities and report it.

There must be bipartisan legislative work and law enforcement action to protect against prostitution as well as punishment of the traffickers -- and the key enablers, including the hotels.

Robert Weiner was Clinton and Bush White House National Drug Policy spokesman, spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee, and senior staff for Four-Star General Barry McCaffrey, Congressmen John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Ed Koch, Claude Pepper, and Sen. Edward Kennedy. Zachary Filtz is Senior Policy Analyst for Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.



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Bob Weiner, a national issues and public affairs strategist, has been spokesman for and directed the public affairs offices of White House Drug Czar and Four Star General Barry McCaffrey, the House Government Operations Committee and Chairman John Conyers (D-MI), Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) and the House Narcotics Committee, and was Chief of Staff for the House Aging Committee and Chairman Claude Pepper (D-FL).

He also was Legislative Assistant to Ed Koch of New York and a political aide to Ted Kennedy (D-MA) for his Presidential and Senate races. Bob worked at the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate as youth voter registration director in 1971-1972 when the constitution was amended to allow 18-year olds the vote.

Since he left the White House in 2001, Bob heads up a public affairs and issue strategies company, Robert Weiner Associates. He is a regular political analyst on Radio America and has appeared on Bill Maher, CNN Crossfire, Today, Good Morning America, and the CBS, NBC, and ABC evening news. He is widely published in columns he writes on national issues in major papers throughout the country including recently the Washington Post, Denver Post, Miami Herald, Christian Science Monitor, New York Daily News, Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Atlanta Constitution, New York Post, Washington Times, Sacramento Bee, Palm Beach Post, Salt Lake Tribune, Minneapolis Star Tribune, and Adweek. He is also regularly quoted in key media coast-to-coast, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, AP and Reuters, concerning the presidential campaign and national issues.