

Friday, March 27, 2015 | Star Tribune

---

## North metro prostitution investigators follow money to 'bigger fish'

Article by: Shannon Prather and Karen Zamora

Star Tribune staff writers

March 26, 2015 - 9:44 PM

For almost a year, Anoka County detectives staked out a massage parlor suspected of prostitution in a nondescript strip mall in Ramsey. They tracked the suspected prostitutes, the owner and the manager, linked the business to an apartment where the sex workers stayed, traced money and analyzed cellphone and financial data.

It paid off. The manager and owner were charged this month with felony receiving profits from prostitution — the third major recent prostitution sting in Anoka County where police targeted those who profit.

That's a far different approach from the old catch-and-release way of doing business — a quick bust to round up prostitutes and clients, charge them with misdemeanors, then watch them walk out the door. It's part of a nationwide shift toward focusing on the profiteers and clients rather than the sex workers, and trying to help the latter, many of whom are under the thumb of traffickers or pimps.

"We are trying to build the case more against the owners and the managers, the people facilitating it, versus us going in and arresting [the prostitutes]," said Anoka County Sheriff's Detective Mike Schantzen.

As prostitution continues to creep into the Twin Cities' northern suburbs, brought by sex traffickers seeking to avoid big-city vice squads, the Anoka County sheriff and police departments have ratcheted up their response.

Police agencies have come together to form the Anoka County human trafficking task force. Anoka County law enforcement is also working more closely with federal authorities when sex traffickers move women across state lines. And suburban city councils, including Ramsey, are more often requiring licenses for massage parlors.

Even then, detectives say, it isn't easy. Finding the time and money to investigate is a constant struggle, and the targets — those running sex operations — can be elusive.

"The sex trade is unfortunately alive and well in the suburbs," said Ramsey Police Chief Jeff Katers. "There has been a change in law enforcement response to human trafficking. ... We used to go after the workers, the prostitutes. Now we are going after the johns and the bigger fish.

"[If] you cite the workers, they will backfill it with another worker from another location."

Anoka County prosecutors have charged 13 felony prostitution cases in the past five years.

The Anoka County Sheriff's Office has investigated two massage parlors for prostitution in Ramsey since 2012, charging managers and owners.

High-tech tracking

In March, the owner and manager of the staked-out Ramsey massage parlor, Sunlight Asian Massage, both were charged with felony receiving profits from prostitution after nearly a year of investigation. The court case is still pending.

According to court documents, Anoka County detectives observed the owner, Eswin Berrios, 41, driving women from an apartment to the massage parlor.

Berrios paid the apartment rent, and police later discovered nearly \$60,000 in cash there, according to court documents. Police also found ads for the parlor in Backpages.com featuring scantily clad women.

Detectives used cutting-edge tools to make their case, including analyzing cellphones and computers, reviewing business records and forensic accounting.

"The crimes have become more sophisticated, so we have to, as well," said Blaine Police Chief Chris Olson.

In 2013, Anoka County detectives uncovered a sex trafficking operation run out of a Fridley apartment. Napoleon Long, then 27, of Fridley, was sentenced to 15 years in federal prison for trafficking as many as 40 girls, shuttling them from city to city across the Midwest. An accomplice was sentenced in Anoka County District Court.

Schantzen and fellow Anoka County sheriff's deputy Thomas Strusinski spent months building a federal sex trafficking case that involved subpoenas and dissecting hundreds of pages of electronic and financial records, as well as surveillance. They traveled to cities across the Midwest to investigate.

Vednita Carter, executive director of Breaking Free, a nonprofit that helps women escape prostitution, lauded the shift toward targeting those who profit from prostitution and sex trafficking.

"That's a good thing in many ways — [they] shouldn't be able to get away with that," Carter said. "The focus should be on the men ... who are purchasing. When you can get a handle on this and hold them accountable, things are going to change, and you won't have a ton of prostitution in your community."

Shannon Prather • 612-673-4804 