



**Sexual Misconduct and Human Trafficking
Addendum Testimony – Sarah Robinson, Deputy Director
House Government Operations - May 7, 2019**

Thank you for the invitation to testify today. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is Vermont’s leading voice on domestic and sexual violence in our state. We represent 15 Member Organizations throughout the state which provide advocacy and support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Together, these organizations served 8,550 individuals last year in Vermont and reached 14,000 youth through prevention programming in schools and other settings throughout our state.

I am here to speak with you about the amendment to H. 104 pertaining to massage therapists. In recent years, the Vermont Network and our Member Organizations have worked with multiple people who have experienced sexual misconduct by massage therapists. These experiences include misconduct by self-employed individuals, those working at spas within resorts or hotels, and those working for national massage chains with franchises in Vermont. While the details and severity of these claims vary, each constituted clear violations of personal autonomy and common-sense standards of appropriate behavior on the part of massage therapists. While this misconduct was clearly unprofessional, in some cases the acts likely did not rise to the level of criminal misdeeds. Several of these cases have left victims deeply traumatized and mistrustful of a modality and profession that is intended to be therapeutic. While many of these victims have sought the counsel and support of advocates or attorneys associated with Vermont Network programs, very few have chosen to pursue criminal complaints due to the shame associated with this victimization and the difficulty of navigating the criminal process. One notable exception is the case of Roger Schmidt of Middlebury who was charged last year with videotaping many of his clients without their consent and engaging in other questionable behavior with clients seeking massage therapy.¹

In addition to these individual cases, there is a troubling relationship between human trafficking, sexual exploitation and so-called massage therapy establishments across Vermont and the U.S. There are an estimated 9,000 illicit massage parlors across the country through which people – often women who are immigrants or other vulnerable persons – are coerced into performing sexual acts as a condition of their employment. It is not uncommon for these establishments to functionally imprison people through isolation, and controlling their means of survival, including their housing, income and ability to communicate with others.

¹ <https://www.addisonindependent.com/201807massage-therapist-faces-new-allegations>



According to the American Massage Therapy Association, 46 states license and regulate massage therapists in the U.S. Vermont is one of only 4 states (Vermont, Wyoming, Kansas and Missouri) that does not regulate the massage therapy profession. In 2016, the Office of Professional Regulation conducted its most recent preliminary report about the licensing of massage therapists. At that time, the report concluded that the regulation of these professionals was not required for the purposes of protecting the public. We believe that recent incidents in Vermont necessitate that the office of Professional Regulation assess whether new regulation of businesses or individuals offering massage services will serve the interests of public safety pertaining to sexual misconduct and human trafficking. To this end, we worked to collaboratively propose the amended language in H. 104.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.