



Senate Government Operations: Licensing of Massage Therapists in Vermont

Sarah Robinson, Deputy Director

April 10, 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 licensing of massage therapists in Vermont. 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. 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.

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

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



does not regulate the massage therapy profession. In 2016, the Office of Professional Regulation conducted a 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 developments in Vermont necessitate that the regulation of massage therapists be reconsidered. We hope that the Office of Professional Regulation will conduct another Sunrise Report and include in their process an opportunity for victims of sexual misconduct to be heard on this issue.

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