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Dear Members of the House Government Operations Committee,

We write in strong support of H.623, legislation that would require ***licensure of massage therapists and massage establishments*** in Vermont.

Vermont is currently one of only five states that does not require state licensure for massage therapists—and the only state on the East Coast without such regulation. As the only New England state without licensure, it is an open invitation to anyone to come to Vermont to set up illicit businesses or engage in illicit sexual conduct.

Establishing ***licensure*** for both individual practitioners and establishments would provide the highest level of public protection against the growing number of illegal massage businesses engaged in human trafficking. It would also help prevent unlawful sexual conduct by individual practitioners, while offering important safeguards for Vermont consumers. Sexual misconduct complaints against this profession vastly exceed most other professions under OPR's jurisdiction.

Over the past several years, Vermont law enforcement, prosecutors and OPR, have investigated and prosecuted numerous types of serious criminal cases involving massage therapists and establishments that emphasize the need for the highest level of public protection that OPR can provide – ***licensure***. OPR currently requires only registration, not licensure, of massage therapists and establishments – and they are recommending only registration of massage establishments. Anyone, ***without any qualifications at all***, can register as a massage therapist and/or a massage establishment.

Licensure, with its education, training, and background check requirements, would serve as a preventative tool to reduce the number of illicit businesses in Vermont before they are established. For these reasons, we both urge the Committee to support H.623, ***and to hear from many practitioners in the field, especially those working with human trafficking survivors***, who can share “on the ground” examples happening in Vermont communities.

Respectfully submitted,

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