

Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

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[Home](#) > Advocacy group hopes to rewrite Alaska's sex trafficking laws, make sex workers safer

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Main Image:

[Alaska International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers 04.jpg](#) ^[2]

About a dozen proponents of stronger rights for sex workers gathered at a downtown Anchorage bar Tuesday night to speak against violence often associated with that line of work; violence perpetuated not only by customers but by laws meant to protect prostitutes from further harm, they said.

The small gathering drew an Alaska graduate student studying justice, women in the trade, a historical writer and the clinical officer of a mental health services nonprofit operating statewide. It served as Anchorage's part in the 11th annual International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, meant to highlight the oftentimes commonplace violence endured by sex workers. It also serves to recognize them as more than victims.

Alaska's history and economic growth is steeped in prostitution and "dance hall girls." Women emigrated to the state during the gold rush, offering respite in mining camps where the male to female ratio was as disproportionate as seven to one, said Lael Morgan, author of "[Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush: Secret History of the Far North](#)" ^[3]. Morgan was on hand during Tuesday's event at Fusions to give a brief background of ladies of the night in the north.

"Good time girls' have far fewer rights today (than) their pioneering predecessors," she said. "This is not a new thing, and it was handled better in the past."

Some of the advocates at the event called for nothing less than the decriminalization of prostitution. They argued new laws, like a sex trafficking bill passed just last year by the Alaska Legislature, result in more problems than solutions. Branding prostitutes as criminals is the cause of more violence, said Maxine Doogan, an advocate for sex workers' rights.

Protecting sex workers from harm

Doogan represents the San Francisco-based Erotic Service Providers Union, one of the advocacy groups that recently [helped overturn regulations in California](#) ^[4] that barred prostitutes who were beaten or raped from receiving financial compensation or health care after their assaults.

The 14-year-old policy states that victims of violent crimes can be denied compensation based on the events leading up to those crimes, such as mutual combat, drug activity or prostitution. Sex workers and advocates argued the law was discriminatory and falsely blamed prostitutes for

their own rapes. They said it also put other women at greater risk.

California is the only state that blocks prostitutes from victim compensation funds, a state official there told the Associated Press [5]. Now, its three-member Victim Compensation and Government Claims Board will begin a formal process to remove the policy from its guidelines.

Doogan said the ultimate goal is the decriminalization of prostitution nationwide. Laws “incentivizing the protection of (sex workers) instead of harming them” need to be passed, she said.

Generally, when lawmakers create laws meant to punish sex workers or other criminal goings-on related to that workforce, it's done so by groups with political interests beyond “saving children” from sex trafficking, Doogan said. Sex workers content with their lifestyles then often get caught in the legal crosshairs, even when they themselves are victims of rape and assault, she said.

But fights for decriminalization often fail with opponents arguing prostitution is immoral and dangerous. Smaller achievements like the change in California's victim compensation law help sex workers' immediate dilemmas, Doogan said. Alaska advocates hope to repeal the state's current sex trafficking laws and replace them with something better. That difficult process was set in motion with a records request.

Improving the situation?

In April 2012, the Alaska Legislature passed House Bill 359 [6], a piece of legislation sponsored by Gov. Sean Parnell that strengthened the penalties for anyone conspiring to commit human or sex trafficking crimes.

Lawmakers said the bill would stiffen the penalties, remove the label “prostitute” from victims and change court procedures in an effort to speed up and make the judicial process easier on those victims.

As a justice graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Terra Burns is trying to figure out whether or not the newly passed law is working as intended. So far, she said she's discovered little improvement.

Burns works with Community United for Safety and Protection -- a group of sex trafficking survivors, former and current sex workers and their allies.

“In Alaska, sex workers don't call the police, because when they do they go to jail,” Burns said.

She wanted to know how the new law was actually being applied since its inception, so she requested court filings for all the state cases involving sex trafficking and prostitution in 2012 and 2013. The Alaska Department of Law responded with six case numbers.

According to Burns, every defendant charged with sex trafficking under the new law has also been charged with prostituting themselves.

One such case involves three Kenai Peninsula women who worked at Gifted Hands Massage in Kenai, a small city of nearly 7,000 located near the mouth of the world-famous river sharing the

same name.

The massage parlor's operator, 49-year-old Karen Carpenter, was charged with various degrees of sex trafficking, including first-degree. Police say she persuaded two young girls to perform sex acts for clients. However, the alleged victims -- aged 19 and 20 -- of Carpenter's crimes were both also charged with misdemeanor prostitution. Both pleaded guilty earlier this year.

"What is clear is that in the year and a half since they were passed, the new sex trafficking laws have only been used against sex workers and not to protect them. This criminalization makes sex workers more, not less, vulnerable to sex trafficking," Burns said.

The vulnerable victims

The arguments for legalizing prostitution in Alaska speak against what experts testified before a sex trafficking task force in late 2012 [7]. In November of last year, a vice unit detective with the Anchorage Police Department told a panel of lawmakers the crime is notoriously underreported.

Among those most vulnerable are chronic runaways whose own parents have quit looking for them, the detective said. Authorities testifying also said other highly susceptible victims include Alaska Native girls from rural villages.

Patrick Ventgen, chief clinical officer for Akeela [8] -- a behavioral health agency offering mental health and substance abuse programs in Anchorage and Ketchikan -- said many of the agency's clients have "a history of occupation in prostitution." He was the sole nonprofit representative and male speaker at Tuesday's gathering.

Akeela also operates in the state's jails and prisons.

Many of the Alaskans Ventgen and his colleagues have helped fell into prostitution as a means of survival; in the world of addiction, it's a common strategy, he said.

But labeling as sex traffickers defendants who in fact aren't results in a lifelong stigma impossible to escape, Ventgen said. He likened it to being on a sex offender list.

"We do not condone illegal behavior of any kind, but we work with our clients from where they're at, to build a life of well-being as they choose to do it," he said.

Commemorating victims of Robert Hansen

Following other speeches, organizers and attendants gathered in a circle for a candlelight vigil -- inside, as temperatures had dipped below zero outside.

The vigil served to commemorate the many victims of Robert Hansen, regarded as Alaska's only serial killer until last year [9]. Hansen often preyed on prostitutes, a segment of the population he regarded as dispensable.

Holding small white tea candles, as green and red lights bounced off the walls of the bar, attendants took turns calling out the names: Lisa Futrell, Sue Luna and "Eklutna Annie," among

others.

These women suffered the ultimate price for simply working, Doogan said.

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[2] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/image/alaska-international-day-end-violence-against-sex-workers-04jpg>

[3] <http://www.amazon.com/Good-Time-Girls-Alaska-Yukon-Gold/dp/0945397763>

[4] <http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Raped-prostitutes-could-be-eligible-for-victim-aid-5060138.php>

[5] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/questions-and-answers-about-calif-sex-worker-rule/2013/12/12/6f5a3f26-62f7-11e3-af0d-4bb80d704888_story.html

[6] <http://gov.alaska.gov/parnell/press-room/full-press-release.html?pr=6104>

[7] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/06/sex-trafficking-alaska-task-force_n_2081884.html

[8] <http://www.akeela.us/>

[9] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20130409/audio-tapes-reveal-serial-killer-israel-keyes-wish-be-executed>

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