



ZACH KLEIN
COLUMBUS CITY ATTORNEY

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Contact: Meredith Tucker, 614.645.8997
Email: mctucker@columbus.gov

In Landmark Case, City of Columbus Uses Nuisance Abatement Code to Shut Down Alleged Human Trafficking Operation

Joint investigation by City of Columbus, Franklin County Sheriff's Office, Human Trafficking Task Force obtained evidence against north side massage parlor

COLUMBUS, OH—Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein announced today that the City of Columbus secured an emergency court order to immediately vacate and shutter a north side massage parlor that investigators say was a front for prostitution. The case is the first of its kind in the City of Columbus to use civil litigation authorized under the state's nuisance abatement code to shut down a human trafficking operation.

City Attorney Klein's office filed a request for an *ex parte* temporary restraining order in the Franklin County Environmental Court to board up East Wind Massage, located at [6815 Flags Center Drive](#) at the intersection of Cleveland Avenue and Shrock Road near Sharon Woods Metro Park.

The property owner is listed as a company registered in the state of Delaware named Flags Columbus Partners LP. A separate limited liability company registered in Ohio, Far Eastern Health Spa, is the holder of the massage license at the premises. William D. Cope of Grove City is listed as the president of Far Eastern Health Spa and Lihua Qiao is identified as vice president and operator of the massage parlor.

Representatives from the Salvation Army and Asian American Services were onsite following the board-up to assist any of the workers who were in need of help.

“We especially want to thank the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, Columbus Division of Police and the Human Trafficking Task Force for working together on this landmark case,” said City Attorney Zach Klein. **“We hope today's court order sends a strong message to other operators in the city who may be engaging in illicit activity that this is the first case of its kind, but it may not be the last.”**

The Columbus Division of Police and the Franklin County Sheriff's Office began investigating the business last year after receiving complaints about potential prostitution and human trafficking occurring at the premises.

According to court documents, investigators reviewed “Sex Guide USA,” a website where reviews for sexually oriented massage parlor businesses are posted, and discovered 13 postings referencing “sexual conduct in exchange for money” at the premises.

Detectives also reviewed Backpage.com, a website frequently used to advertise sexual conduct for hire, and found advertisements for East Wind Massage that contained “suggestive photos of young Asian girls.”

In late December, police officials sent nuisance abatement warning letters via certified mail to all business entities associated with the parlor. The letter to Flags Columbus Partners LP in Delaware was returned to sender, the letter to Far Eastern Health Spa, LLC was delivered to the listed address and the letter to East Wind Massage was signed as received on January 2, 2018.

A week later, detectives received a call from an attorney representing the massage parlor. The attorney advised that his client was informed by the individual “responsible for running the business...[that] there was no criminal activity occurring.” Police officials advised the attorney of his client’s responsibility to abate the nuisance under Ohio law and he indicated that he understood, according to court documents.

In March and as late as yesterday, investigators continued to obtain evidence that sexual conduct in exchange for money was occurring at the premises.

“Oftentimes, the workers of these types of massage parlors are victims of human trafficking,” said Senior Assistant City Attorney Bill Sperlazza. “By not only shutting the operation down but also by lining up agencies offering resources, our first priority is to assist the victims who want to escape their environment.”

In filing a civil motion for injunctive relief along with the emergency TRO request, Sperlazza, who is the Zone Initiative Attorney assigned to the north side of Columbus, is seeking to prove that the owner/operators are guilty of maintaining a nuisance by establishing that they, as owners of the premises, “knew of, participated in, or acquiesced to the activity which constituted the nuisance” as prescribed by [Chapter 3767](#) of the Ohio Revised Code.

The hearing for preliminary and permanent injunctive relief is scheduled for 11:00 a.m. on May 4, 2018.

If the property is ultimately declared to be a statutorily defined public nuisance, state law grants the court authority to order the premises shut down for up to one year following the permanent injunction hearing.

Copies of the city’s [complaint](#) and the [court’s order](#) are available online.

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