

A Window into the Utah Trafficking in Persons Task Force

MESSAGE BUSINESSES AND SEX TRAFFICKING

The Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Task Force to Combat Human Trafficking

is a U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) grant-funded program that brings together key partners to develop, expand, or strengthen multidisciplinary task forces to address human trafficking. With this approach, local, state, or tribal service providers; law enforcement; prosecutors; and other collaborators can:

- Increase identification of victims of trafficking,
- Access a comprehensive array of service options, and
- Seek justice for victims by implementing victim-centered and trauma-informed investigations and prosecutions.

THE WINDOWS SERIES



Foundations Edition



Case Spotlight Edition



Disciplines Edition

INTRODUCTION

The **Windows Series** offers insights into the ECM model and task forces with examples from the efforts of ECMs nationwide. These examples showcase different structures, successes, innovations, and ideas that:

- demonstrate a commitment to addressing serious crime and supporting victims and survivors;
- illustrate the spectrum of activities and approaches employed by the ECMs;
- share successful strategies to encourage stakeholder cooperation;
- enhance public awareness by highlighting the nature and scope of work;
- offer a behind-the-scenes look at the field and its day-to-day work to a wider audience.

The **Case Spotlight Edition** features cases investigated by ECMs, highlighting the range of scenarios as well as the different methods, partnerships and collaborative efforts that go into increasing identification of victims of all ages and of all forms of human trafficking; providing access to services; and conducting victim-centered and trauma-informed investigations to prosecute traffickers.

A MESSAGE BUSINESS TRAFFICKING CASE



This case spotlight highlights the work of the Utah Trafficking in Persons Task Force in identifying potential sex trafficking within multiple massage businesses in Salt Lake City.

Utah Massage Businesses and Sex Trafficking



TASK FORCE | The Utah Trafficking in Persons Task Force

VICTIMS | 1 (female)

PERPETRATORS | 3



TRAFFICKING | Sex trafficking through force & fraud

PRIMARY CHARGE | Exploiting prostitution (state)

SENTENCE | 5 years & \$457,690.26 seized

SNAPSHOT | The Utah Trafficking in Persons Task Force (UTIP) uncovered a sex trafficking operation involving multiple massage businesses in Salt Lake City. One survivor, recruited from Los Angeles under false pretenses, was coerced into performing commercial sex acts. Three traffickers were ultimately convicted, and \$457,690.26 was seized. This case demonstrates the importance of early victim identification, multilingual support, and interagency collaboration.

Background

The UTIP Task Force was established in 2012 following the expansion of the SECURE Strike Force's mandate by the Utah Attorney General's Office (AGO) to include human trafficking. The Asian Association of Utah (AAU) began providing services to foreign-born victims in 2010 and expanded to all trafficking victims by 2014. In 2015, the AGO/AAU collaborative received Enhanced Collaborative Model to Combat Human Trafficking Task Force funding.

In early 2021, Utah AGO/UTIP received information through the trafficking tipline that the registered agent/owner of a massage business located in West Valley City, Utah posted an online advertisement for massage therapy positions. Upon arrival, the women were informed by the owner they would be expected to engage in sexual activities with clients and if they left there would be repercussions.

Case Summary

In March 2021, the SECURE Strike Force followed up on the trafficking tipline information and arranged an interview with a reported victim. The AAU was engaged early to provide victim support and translation services.

The subsequent investigation was led by the SECURE Strike Force and eventually expanded to include six massage businesses and three suspects who were the registered agent/owners of the massage businesses located in Salt Lake and Utah Counties. In September 2021, search warrants were executed on the massage businesses, two residences and a bank safe deposit box by the SECURE Strike Force with the assistance of local and federal law enforcement agencies. Cash in the amount of \$185,140.85 was located, alongside voluminous electronic evidence. Although the victim decided not to participate with the criminal investigation to establish the force, fraud, or coercion elements of human trafficking, three defendants ultimately pled guilty to *Exploitation of Prostitution* and *Pattern of Unlawful Activity*. One of the defendants also pled guilty to an additional charge of *Money Laundering*.

With minimal notice, the AAU provided critical Chinese language translation and interpretation services. AAU also provided housing, basic needs assistance, ongoing support to the victim, and engaged with four other potential victims who declined services. Even though the victim chose not to participate in further legal proceedings and relocated, her initial report enabled the case to move forward. In this case, Human Trafficking charges were not pursued but the task force's victim-centered approach still supported her decision to relocate, and for related charges to be pursued without reliance on victim testimony.

Thank you to task force members of the Utah Trafficking in Persons Task Force for contributing case details, insights and lessons learned.

COLLABORATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

Victim Services

- AAU provided real-time interpretation and translation during the execution of search warrants to ensure victims knew what was happening. AAU has an official Interpreting and Translation Department with certified contracted interpreters. The agency has two Mandarin speaking interpreters who regularly participate in law enforcement operations where individuals speak Mandarin.

Victim-Centered Practices

- The AGO and AAU jointly supported the victim through her initial disclosure and facilitated safe housing.
- Although the multidisciplinary team allows for collaborative efforts, participation in an investigation is not required to receive services. AAU offered ongoing support *for relocation* – even after the victim opted out of participating in the investigation.

Partnerships

- For the investigation, the UAGO/SECURE Strike Force partnered with many local departments: Taylorsville PD, West Valley City PD, American Fork PD, Lindon PD, Unified PD of Greater Salt Lake, Davis County Metro, Park City PD, West Jordan PD, the state Department of Public Safety and federal partners.
- Through partnerships and collaboration, they were able to interview potential victims through interpreters and collect and translate extensive social media records which were instrumental in building the case.

THE ECM – WHAT MADE THIS COLLABORATION EFFECTIVE

Strong Relationships: To execute search warrants simultaneously at six locations, the task force leveraged the strength of their collaborative relationships with multiple departments. Service providers were also on standby to offer culturally responsive interpretation and support services.

Prosecution: A successful prosecution using Utah Code held traffickers accountable even without victims on the stand during trial.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Timely collaboration with service providers can significantly improve victim engagement and safety.
- Certified interpreter and translation services should be integrated early and throughout investigations involving non-English speakers.
- Even when a victim disengages, their initial disclosure can be enough to build a successful case with proper interagency coordination.
- Local-level human trafficking cases can and do succeed when supported by a robust task force framework.

REFERENCES

Utah Attorney General's Office. (2021, September 08). Massage Business Criminal Enterprise Busted [Press release].

<https://attorneygeneral.utah.gov/2021/09/08/massage-parlor-criminal-enterprise-busted-trafficking-victims-rescued/>