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Forced to have sex with 1,000 men, a girl is now suing the motel that she says let it happen

The sex-trade is often pretty easy to spot. A teenage girl accompanies an older man at a motel front desk as he pays for a room in cash. Men come and go from the room for 30 minutes at a time. A scantily dressed girl wanders the hallways in the middle of the night.

Motels and hotels across the country are facilitating sex trafficking, often cloaking the traffickers in anonymity and profiting from their business. The pimps and prostitutes are occasionally nabbed and criminally prosecuted. But rarely does anything happen to the hotel owners and staff that turn a blind eye.

Now a lawsuit brought by a 14-year-old girl in Philadelphia and her lawyer aims to change that. She is suing a motel widely known as the “local epicenter of human trafficking” for knowingly renting rooms to men who forced teenage girls to have sex. The target is the Roosevelt Inn, a roadside motel in northeast Philadelphia notorious for drug deals and violent crime as well as prostitution.

In this budget hotel, a lawsuit alleges, the girl was held for weeks and months at a time, barred from leaving, and was forced to have sex with as many as 1,000 men over the course of two years, **Nadeem Bezar, a lawyer at the Kline & Specter law firm told The Washington Post.**

All the while, the hotel’s owners and staff continued to lease rooms to her traffickers, profiting off their abuse and doing nothing to stop it, the suit claims.

The allegations were laid out Friday in a suit filed in the Philadelphia Common Pleas Court against the hotel, its manager, and its parent company, UFVS Management Company, of Purchase, N.Y. It was filed by Kline & Specter on behalf of the girl, who is now 17 and was only identified in the suit as “M.B.”

It is the first known civil suit brought under the Pennsylvania Human Trafficking Law of 2014, which allows for compensation for victims from those who profit directly or indirectly from human trafficking, Bezar said.

According to research by the Villanova Law School’s Institute to Address Commercial Sexual Exploitation, it does not appear that a hotel has been held liable for an employee’s participation in or facilitation of a human trafficking offense in part, perhaps, because victims of trafficking may not “self identify” as victims due to the trauma of their experience and even if they do, they may be unaware that they have any opportunity for redress.

The Philadelphia lawsuit seeks more than \$50,000 in compensatory and punitive damages.

“People are policing the hallways, men and other johns are coming in and out of the hotel, and young girls walking up and down the hallways are scantily dressed,” said Bezar said. “It’s open and obvious, it’s about as

obvious as it gets.”

The way the girl got roped into trafficking is a familiar story. After a falling out with her parents, she left home and moved from place to place. Desperate to avoid homelessness, she began spending time with the “wrong group of people,” Bezar said. She was sold into sex slavery and forced to perform sexual acts on men more than twice or three times her age, the lawsuit alleges.

Though the girl’s abusers have already been convicted and sent to prison, her family and lawyers now hope to hold the motel owner responsible for “allowing this to happen,” Bezar said. The girl’s lawyers declined to identify her abusers, saying they feared exposing her to retaliation.

The staff at the motel — which prosecutors have called the “local epicenter of human trafficking” — knew or had “constructive knowledge” that the girl was being sexually exploited, according to the lawsuit, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported. Her traffickers lured customers to the motel through Internet advertisements, had men call a number to negotiate a price for sex, then had the men go to the motel’s front desk.

An employee would then direct them to the room where the girl was forced to work as a prostitute. Condoms and condom wrappers were strewn about, and the room often smelled like marijuana, according to the suit.

A hotel clerk named “Abdul” was made fully aware that the girl “and other underage children were compelled to perform sex for money,” the suit says. The girl was dressed in sexually explicit clothing and “visibly treated in an aggressive manner” by traffickers, according to the lawsuit.

“If she tried to leave there was someone at the bottom of the staircase that prevented her from doing so,” Bezar said.

The teenage girl has since reconnected with her family, and is now receiving therapy and additional services from city and private agencies, Bezar said.

Since the lawsuit was filed, several other victims have come forward to the lawyers to tell them about their own experiences with sex trafficking, Bezar said. Some were young women, but all were involved with sex trafficking at the same hotel under separate circumstances, he said.

The hotel’s manager, Yagna Patel, 72, told the Philadelphia Inquirer on Friday he had not seen the lawsuit and was not aware of any minors allegedly being victimized in the motel. “We just rent the room and that’s all we can do,” he said.

Patel, who said he has managed the inn for 30 years, said he has a close relationship with the police and that if there was any inappropriate behavior in a room, the motel guests would be told to leave.

“It’s hard to control anybody,” Patel said. “If we think a lot of people are having a party in the room, we kick them out.”

“The motel has a history of illicit activities, from drugs to several incidents surrounding trafficking and prostitution,” Bezar said. Several people have been convicted over the last few years on charges of using the motel for prostitution, Assistant District Attorney Erin O’Brien told the Inquirer.

“Almost every trafficking investigation we have, we see the victim is at Roosevelt Inn,” O’Brien said. “I know our vice officers are out there on a regular basis.”

Reviews on Yelp and Trip Advisor call the 107-room, two-story motel a “drug infested, crime ridden, prostitution laced” place where the check-in desk contained bulletproof glass “an inch thick.”

“One thing which made us very uncomfortable was that a lot of “girls” were coming in and out all the time,” one guest wrote.

Another reviewer said: “No security at all, these girls are letting their jons in through side doors that are UN-LOCKED. The smell of marijuana through out the place is disgusting,” and added that the “working girls” and their pimps “run a muck half naked through the hallways.”

A different guest said: “Do not bring your kids here please.”

In March 2014, security footage from the Roosevelt Inn circulated on YouTube showing a dramatic gunfight in the motel. The men ran through the hallways, down a stairwell and into the lobby as they fired shots at each other.

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 1,424 cases of human trafficking in hotels and motels were reported between 2007 and 2015, involving 1,867 victims. In 2016 alone, 7,572 human trafficking cases were reported nationwide, including 151 in Pennsylvania.

Bezar said he hopes this lawsuit sends a message to the hotel and motel industry as a whole: “You better pay attention to what’s going on in your hallways.”

If the lawyers can get “some compliance” with the hotel and motel industry, Bezar said, “perhaps we can start to stamp out what’s happening here.”

“If you’re going to run a business, you better be aware of what’s going on,” Bezar said. “You just can’t continue to exploit children.”