

2 Women Get \$24.5M Award In Philly Motel Trafficking Claims

By P.J. D'Annunzio

Law360 (February 9, 2024, 9:40 PM EST) -- An arbitrator has awarded \$24.5 million to two women forced into prostitution as teenagers at the Philadelphia motel where they were subject to human trafficking, their lawyers said Friday, which the motel's owner will have to pay.

Arbitration was conducted by William J. Ricci of Ricci Tyrrell Johnson & Grey, who on Wednesday evening awarded the women \$12 million and \$12.5 million respectively to be paid by Ramara Inc., the owner of the property housing the North American Motor Inns on City Avenue in Philadelphia. The case was originally filed in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas four years ago.

The women, identified by the initials B.H. and C.A. in court documents, were forced into prostitution at the ages of 16 and 17 and were taken to the motel dozens of times. According to a brief in response to Ramara's summary judgment motion, C.A. was told by one of her gun-toting captors that he would kill her family if she didn't cooperate. She was drugged and given a daily quota of earning \$2,000 to \$3,000 from prostitution.

"If she did not make her quota her traffickers would beat, smack, burn, and kick her," C.A.'s brief said.

B.H. faced similar treatment, according to her brief. A portion of a psychiatric expert's testimony in her brief said she suffered sexual abuse from her traffickers and "unknown buyers," as well as threats of violence.

"She witnessed extreme physical violence toward other victims, listened to stories of murder, and was led to believe that the legal repercussions toward her trafficker could not keep her safe from her trafficker. Her trafficker was able to maintain power and control over her and her actions even when he was incarcerated," B.H.'s brief said.

Ramara originally asked the court for summary judgment, arguing that it was the landlord of the property and had no control over what went on there, nor were the plaintiffs business invitees.

"Thus, plaintiff has failed to establish that Ramara breached a duty of care. Ramara did not have employees at the hotel and did not maintain a daily presence at the hotel during the time in which plaintiff has alleged that she was trafficked," the defendant's motion said.

According to a statement from Kline & Specter, representing the women, the sex traffickers were sentenced to prison. One was released while the other remains behind bars.

"What these women went through was horrible," said Nadeem Bezar, one of the women's attorneys, in a statement Friday. "We applaud their bravery in coming forward and vocalizing their experiences. We were honored to represent them and are pleased with the arbitrator's awards."

An attorney for Ramara declined to comment Friday.

The litigation, which includes multiple hotels and their owners as defendants, produced a \$37.5 million verdict against a North American Motor Inns location in West Philadelphia. That case was also arbitrated by Ricci.

The women are represented by Nadeem Bezar and Emily Marks of Kline & Specter PC.

Ramara is represented by Hugh P. O'Neill and John A. Lucy of Thomas Thomas & Hafer LLP.

The cases are B.H. v. Ramara Inc., case number 190303356, and C.A. v. Ramara Inc., case number 190303355, in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas.

--Editing by Adam LoBelia.