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New North Carolina Law Targets Hotels and Motels to Crack Down on Sex Trafficking

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A new North Carolina law that took effect this month is aiming to disrupt sex trafficking by holding lodging operators more accountable and increasing penalties for those caught trying to buy sex.

Under House Bill 971, hotels, motels, and vacation rentals across the state must now implement sex trafficking awareness training for staff every two years, post signs about trafficking prevention, and establish systems for reporting suspected cases to either local law enforcement or the National Human Trafficking Hotline. While some major hotel chains

already had similar protocols in place, the law now makes compliance mandatory and introduces fines of up to \$2,000 for violations.

The legislation comes as hotels and motels continue to be among the top locations used by traffickers, and as more survivors file lawsuits against these establishments for allegedly ignoring red flags.

Pam Strickland, founder of North Carolina Stop Human Trafficking, emphasized the importance of the law's tougher consequences for buyers. "Sex buyers" will now face felony charges for a first offense, making North Carolina just one of two states in the nation to enact such strict punishment, alongside Texas. "For some people, that will be enough to prevent them from doing it," Strickland told The News & Observer.

The new law arrives amid a rising wave of lawsuits against hotel operators accused of enabling or turning a blind eye to trafficking. In one recent case, a woman filed suit against a Charlotte-based Super 8 Motel, alleging that she was trafficked on the premises in 2014 at just 16 years old. The suit claims motel staff ignored clear warning signs and profited by repeatedly renting rooms to the alleged trafficker.

In another North Carolina case, court records detail how two men transported a young woman between hotels in Jacksonville, Charlotte, and Durham, and to Virginia, where she was sold for sex. She was not allowed to leave her room, had to ask for basic necessities, and was abused by her traffickers. Both men were sentenced to a combined 39 years in prison.

According to the Human Trafficking Institute, locally owned hotels were the leading venues for trafficking incidents nationally in 2023. The National Human Trafficking Hotline also listed hotels and motels among the top three trafficking locations in North Carolina, alongside homes and unlicensed massage businesses.

The legislation, while welcomed by advocates, does not permit victims to sue lodging businesses for failure to comply with the law. Still, lawsuits under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), passed in 2000, are increasingly targeting the hotel sector. A Georgia jury recently awarded \$40 million to a woman trafficked at a hotel, possibly the largest such judgment to date.

Strickland argues that reducing demand through tougher penalties is key. “It’s hard because some managers think that if they report a potential case of human trafficking at their property, that will get them negative publicity,” she said. However, arresting buyers on felony charges may send a stronger message. “Their name is in the paper, and other potential sex buyers see that and they go: ‘Oh my goodness, that guy got arrested for buying sex.’” She added, “I need to rethink this.”

With its new approach, North Carolina is betting that a combination of accountability, deterrence, and public exposure will help dismantle a hidden criminal trade that continues to plague communities across the state.