

# New RI Law Banning Indoor Prostitution Leads Some Spas To Close

*Providence Journal*

Word that Rhode Island's governor signed legislation Tuesday afternoon to outlaw indoor prostitution traveled quickly through the state's community of sex workers, leaving many of the women who work at Asian "spas" on edge and their employers angry and without customers.

Neon signs outside some spas went dark; employees at others said they were open, but many of the women, fearing a police crackdown, had refused to come to work.

At the Central Health spa, in Providence, the "open" sign was gone and the doors were locked. "People were banging at the door," said Josh Haywood Jr., a 23-year-old mechanic who works at the garage next door. "They never opened today."

Sex-workers in Rhode Island have been able to operate for years legally out of brothels, strip clubs or their homes because of a nearly 30-year-old loophole in the state's prostitution law. But that changed on Tuesday when Governor Carcieri signed legislation to make prostitution a crime, even if it occurs behind closed doors.

"For almost 30 years, Rhode Island has had the terrible distinction of being the only state outside certain counties in Nevada where indoor prostitution is not considered a crime," Carcieri said. The governor declared that prostitution "erodes the moral fiber of our state," and commended supporters for their hard work in getting the legislation passed during a special session of the General Assembly last week.

The legislation — sponsored by Rep. Joanne M. Giannini, D-Providence, and Sen. Paul V. Jabour, D-Providence — the governor said, will help protect the state's most vulnerable residents and enhance the quality of life in Rhode Island.

The new law "sends a distinct message to any group [that] thinks they could use Rhode Island in furtherance of their illicit business," state police Col. Brendan P. Doherty said at the signing ceremony. "The bottom line is commercial sex is now clearly illegal" in Rhode Island.

Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch said that the new law will "end a blemish" on the state and give law enforcement officers the tools they need to investigate and prosecute prostitution and related criminal activity.

"Does this mean prostitution will be eliminated in Rhode Island forever?" Giannini asked. "Of course not. But it means Rhode Island will no longer be a safe haven for pimping and trafficking, and the victimization of young women."

The law makes indoor prostitution a misdemeanor crime punishable, for first offenders, by up to six months in prison and a fine of up to \$1,000, or both. However, the law empowers judges to erase the criminal convictions of first offenders.

Customers or "johns" face the same penalties as prostitutes, but without the possibility of getting their criminal records expunged.

Warwick police Col. Stephen M. McCartney, of the Rhode Island Police Chief's Association, said

*continued next page*

after the signing that talk about police enforcement of the new law was being “overblown.” People are talking, he said, as if “we’re all of a sudden going to descend, en masse” into suspected brothels.

“We’re looking for the people behind the enterprises,” he said, “more than trying to go after the women.”

Providence police Lt Michael “Mike” E. Correia, who heads the narcotics and organized crime bureau, said in a telephone interview Tuesday that “prostitution isn’t the number-one priority at the police department,” which focuses its efforts on violent crimes. However, he added, the department would certainly act quickly “if we have any evidence that there’s human trafficking going on.”

At the North Main Street Spa, in Providence, a man at the front office said that word of the governor’s action had scared the women working there.

“I usually have four or five girls working,” he said. “I have two workers ... They refuse to come to work. They’re just nervous.”

Anxiety was etched into the faces of a group of Korean women who gathered for lunch Tuesday inside the Grand Slam Pizza & Grill in Pawtucket.

One woman, who asked that her name not be printed, drew circles on a napkin, each one representing a different city in Rhode Island.

Does the new law, she asked a reporter, apply only to Providence or Pawtucket? Or does it apply to all of them?