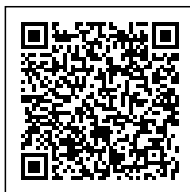




# PANDEMIC MAKES PROSTITUTION TABOO IN NEVADA'S LEGAL BROTHELS

Posted on February 21, 2021 by Michelle L. Price | Associated Press



Before the coronavirus pandemic, tourist-dependent Nevada had a notorious attraction: It was the only place in America where someone could legally pay for sex.

These days, even in the state known for sin, the business is taboo.

Legal brothels have been shuttered for nearly a year, leaving sex workers to offer less-lucrative alternatives like online dates or nonsexual escort services. Those in the industry say many of the licensed prostitutes, who work as independent contractors, have struggled to qualify for unemployment benefits since closures began last March and some have opted to take their work into the shadows, offering sex illegally.

While the business of legal bordellos may seem incompatible with social distancing, sex workers and brothel owners say that's not the case. Like other close-contact industries such as massage therapy and dental services, they contend brothels should be allowed to reopen with protective measures.

"We could easily do work at arm's length, just the same as they do within the massage parlors, which are open in the state of Nevada," sex worker Alice Little said. "You can go to a dentist and have him put his hands in your mouth. You can go to a tattoo parlor and get your face tattooed right now. You can get piercings put in your face. You're certainly not masked for any of those things."

So far, Nevada officials haven't agreed.

A state task force that makes recommendations on coronavirus restrictions hasn't responded to pleas from brothel owners seeking a way to reopen. And a lawsuit Little filed against Gov. Steve Sisolak last year fizzled.

The Democratic governor recently said brothels, along with other adult entertainment like nightclubs and strip clubs, would stay closed at least through May 1. After that, the state may let counties decide whether to allow those businesses to open, as long as COVID-19 infections aren't surging.

Nevada, like many states, saw a spike of coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths around the winter holidays, but since mid-January, those numbers have been steadily declining.

Prostitution is only legal in Nevada's estimated 20 licensed brothels, whose sex workers undergo regular tests for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS and obtain required work cards from local law enforcement after passing an FBI background check.

A throwback to the state's days as a Wild West mining territory, brothels were illegal but tolerated in some areas until Nevada legalized them in 1971.

They're only allowed to operate in counties with populations of less than 700,000 people. Brothels and prostitution are illegal in the counties that include Las Vegas and Reno, but some brothels are a half-hour to an hour away. Some offer free limo rides from the casino-heavy cities.

Little, who was working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch brothel in the capital of Carson City, says she has lost 95% of her income amid the closures. She said she's been providing virtual dates, webcam experiences and creating X-rated content through subscriber site OnlyFans, among other ventures.

"At this point, I am able to survive. I am able to pay my bills. I'm able to put food on the table, but I have had to dip into my savings," Little said.

Other brothel workers who are not comfortable linking their faces to online sex work have had a harder time pivoting to virtual services, she said. Finding a job outside the stigmatized sex industry also can be tough, Little said, because background checks can reveal the work authorization cards prostitutes must have in brothels.

Allissa Starr, who was working at Sheri's Ranch brothel in Pahrump, about an hour outside Las Vegas, said some women she worked with are illegally offering sex for money despite virus concerns.

"They're just doing what they can," she said.

Starr, like Little, started offering virtual dates, where she might share a glass of wine, dinner and conversation with clients. Starr said she eventually got assistance under the federal pandemic unemployment program for gig workers, but it was about 10% of what she had been making and is set to run out soon.

Starr said she's able to cover her bills but can no longer put thousands in savings. She moved to Pittsburgh to live closer to family and save on rent. She's starting a self-care business but said if Nevada's brothels reopen, she'd come back to work one week a month.

"It's a way to easily provide money for me and my family, and it's a way to provide security," Starr said.

Reopening the brothels, Starr said, is "a personal risk, just like traveling. If you wear your mask, if the girls got COVID tests before they came to the ranch, I think it could be done safely."

Mustang Ranch, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) east of Reno, appears to be the only brothel still offering some kind of companionship, taking advantage of an escort license it's had for about two decades. The license allows customers to hire women for nonsexual companionship.

Owner Lance Gilman said temperatures are taken, masks are worn and customers must come to the ranch and say where they'll go on a date, typically a restaurant or casino.

Gilman said it's a much-reduced operation — usually, about 30 women were available for hire 24/7. Only three or four women are working as escorts because many of them are uncomfortable leaving the security of the property for a date, he said.

Mustang Ranch submitted a proposed plan to state officials that suggests reopening for contactless dates in private rooms, with masks

and gloves worn by workers.

“In this industry, much, if not the majority, of the courtesan-customer interaction does not involve physical contact even during normal business operations,” the proposal says.



State officials haven't approved the plan.

Asked how the brothel could ensure sex workers and customers have no physical contact behind closed doors, Gilman said there's no way to make such a guarantee: “All you can do is rely upon the credibility and the ethics of the commitments that are made.”

“Human nature is human nature,” he said.