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SUIT: HOTELS PERMITTED TRAFFICKING

22 Collier properties accused of turning blind eye to signs of prostitution

Jake Allen and Ryan Mills
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The women wandered the Naples hotel hallways at night, strung out on heroin and wearing next to nothing.

They hung out in the lobbies disheveled and with gaping wounds up and down their arms where they were injected with drugs. They smoked outside and ate breakfast with older men who controlled them.

Day and night, random men cycled in and out of the women's hotel rooms, where "do not disturb" signs hung on the doors for days on end.

The rooms reeked. When housekeeping did enter, there was drug and sex paraphernalia, and sometimes blood.

These telltale signs of sex trafficking occurred at 22 Collier County hotels and motels, according to Naples lawyers Yale Freeman and Sharon Hanlon, who are suing the businesses. They say hotel management

See **TRAFFICKING**, Page 4A



Collier County hotels named in sex trafficking lawsuit

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Hampton Inn Naples-I-75 | 7. Best Western Naples Inn & Suites | 12. Glades Motel | 18. Super 8 by Wyndham Naples |
| 2. Staybridge Suites Naples-Gulf Coast | 8. Ramada Naples | 13. Best Western Naples Plaza Hotel | 19. La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Naples East (I-75) |
| 3. Residence Inn by Marriott Naples | 9. Naples Park Central Hotel | 14. Spinnaker Inn of Naples | 20. Holiday Inn Express Naples South - I-75 |
| 4. Inn of Naples | 10. La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Naples Downtown | 15. Quality Inn & Suites Golf Resort | 21. Conty's Motel |
| 5. Naples Garden Inn | 11. Sunrise Motel | 16. Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott Naples | 22. Days Inn & Suites by Wyndham Bonita Springs North Naples (not shown on map) |
| 6. Gulfcoast Inn | | 17. Comfort Inn & Executive Suites | |

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SOUTHWEST FLORIDA LIFESTYLES

Senior homes, country clubs keep up with the times

Andrew Wigdor

Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Facilities investing millions in upgrades to stay ahead of competition

Out with the old, and in with the new. Retirement communities and country clubs, some of the premier destinations for Southwest Florida's older and more affluent, are getting with the times and fighting to stay on top of fierce competition.

Facilities that have been in business for decades are spending millions implementing cutting-edge technology, design, architecture and amenities. After all, experts say that customers no longer want just an experience or

health care. Modern club-goers and residents are looking for a lifestyle.

Communities transition to 'resort-style' living

With Naples retirement community Moorings Park celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2020, managers

See **LIFESTYLES**, Page 8A

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Sex trafficking lawsuit

Collier sex trafficking suit part of national effort

Jake Allen
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

A lawsuit filed against 22 Naples-area hotels and motels is in line with a national effort to hold hotels accountable for ignoring sex trafficking activities, according to an expert from the Human Trafficking Institute in Virginia.

Kyleigh Feehs, associate legal counsel for the institute, said her organization is still collecting data but has tracked six civil sex trafficking lawsuits filed in 2019 against hotel companies nationwide at the federal level.

The lawsuits, filed in Ohio, New York and Massachusetts, name some of the same defendants as the lawsuit filed at the circuit court level in Collier County.

The overlapping defendants named in the lawsuits are Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, Choice Hotels International, Best Western International and InterContinental Hotels Corporation.

There were no civil federal lawsuits filed against hotel companies that allege sex trafficking in 2017 or 2018, according to the data from the Human Trafficking Institute.

The uptick in civil suits filed against hotel companies in 2019 is due to a focus on a provision from 2003 in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and most likely not because of an increase in sex trafficking at hotels or motels, Feehs said.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, enacted in 2000, was refined in a way that allows trafficking victims to file civil lawsuits against their traffickers in federal court, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

The revision in 2003 includes language that civil action may be brought by the victims against the perpetrator or whoever knowingly benefited fi-

nancially from the sex trafficking, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

This is the provision that has allowed sex trafficking victims to file federal civil suits against hotel companies, Feehs said.

A lawsuit filed in Ohio in March 2019 against several hotel companies, including Best Western International, Inc., may have been the first time the 2003 provision was used by a sex trafficking victim to file a federal civil lawsuit against a hotel company, according to a report from law firm Jones Day and research by the Naples Daily News.

Each state has its own legislation to hold sex traffickers accountable, including some that allows for civil lawsuits to be filed against hotel companies by victims.

A 2018 Florida bill that would have established in statute the right of sex trafficking survivors to sue businesses that knowingly facilitate their trafficking — including hotels and motels — died under pressure from the industry.

Still, attorneys can use other creative legislation apart from trafficking statutes that gives victims the right to sue hotel companies, Feehs said.

“There has been a focus on the provision that allows for suits to be brought against entities that financially benefit from trafficking,” Feehs said. “That’s why these lawsuits are being filed. It’s to try and hold some of these hotels accountable.”

Her organization only tracks federal cases as state data is harder to access, Feehs said.

Yale Freeman, one of the lawyers behind the lawsuit filed against the 22 local hotels and motels, said his is the first of its kind in Collier County.

The lawsuit filed by Freeman alleges the two dozen Naples-area hotels and motels did nothing to stop bla-

tant sex trafficking activity in 2015 and early 2016.

The telltale signs of the activity were women wandering the hotel hallways strung out on heroin while wearing provocative clothing, and men cycling in out of the women’s rooms that had “do not disturb” signs hung on the door for days, Freeman said.

Efforts by attorneys to consolidate multiple federal human trafficking lawsuits filed against hotel companies nationwide are ongoing, The Associated Press reported in December.

Attorneys have asked a federal panel to consolidate at least 21 such lawsuits pending in 11 states into a single case in federal court in Columbus, arguing that the lawsuits contain the same basic allegations.

The complaints have been filed in Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington state and, most recently, Maine.

About 1,500 victims of human trafficking have retained lawyers in the various lawsuits, and as many as 7,000 are expected over time, Paul Pennock, an attorney with the New York-based firm Weitz & Luxenberg told The Associated Press.

Pennock’s law firm is leading the efforts to consolidate the lawsuits.

Jennifer Drit, executive director of the Florida Council Against Sexual Violence, said she expects to see more lawsuits accusing hotels and motels of ignoring sex trafficking.

“Until institutions and businesses take seriously their responsibility and their ability to stop this sort of thing from happening on their properties, we’re not going to be able to get a handle on sexual abuse,” Drit said. “They have a responsibility to our communities and to society to do that, and they have the capacity to do it.”

Trafficking

Continued from Page 1A

did nothing to stop blatant sex trafficking in 2015 and early 2016.

Hotel and motel owners said they weren’t aware of any sex trafficking at their businesses. Some denied it ever occurred.

“We didn’t see any suspicious activity. If we do see it, we always call,” said Yogeshkumar Patel, owner of the Glades Motel on U.S. 41 East. “We’re always here. We watch everybody. We don’t allow in-and-out people. We don’t allow unregistered people to stay.”

In tony Naples, a tropical playground for the wealthy and powerful, there is a seedy undercurrent of sex trafficking and heroin addiction, Freeman said.

“What surprised me about this case was how big it was and how open it was in a community like ours,” Freeman said. “These hotels permitted open sex trafficking to occur at each of their locations.”

The lawsuit, which stems from a criminal case in Collier County that sent two sex traffickers to prison in 2019, accuses the hotels and motels of turning a blind eye to sex trafficking, while profiting from the room occupancies of the victims and traffickers.

While lawsuits accusing hotels and motels of facilitating sex trafficking are filed sporadically across the country, this is the first in Collier County, Freeman said.

Linda Oberhaus, executive director of the Naples-based Shelter for Abused Women & Children, agreed and said the lawsuit is “the first of its kind that I’ve

Continued on next page



Hanson



Freeman

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Thursday, February 20, 5-6 p.m.

Speaker: **Anthony Vernava, M.D., Board-Certified in Colon and Rectal Surgery***

6101 Pine Ridge Road – Hospital Cafeteria



Sex trafficking lawsuit

Continued from previous page

seen since being here in the Naples community.”

Oberhaus has lived in the area for 12 years.

The two plaintiffs in the lawsuit are Naples-area women who Freeman said were trafficked at the hotels. They are identified in the suit by only their initials, S.Y. and C.S.

Freeman, who began investigating the case in 2017, said it's clear staff witnessed the conditions of the hotel rooms and saw the women, who he said were forced to provide sex to up to 20 men a day.

“In some of our cases it's just so obvious that the hotel was participating,” Freeman said.

The lawsuit comes on the heels of a new state law mandating that Florida hotel, motel and massage parlor owners train employees to detect and report human trafficking.

A 2018 bill that would have established in statute the right of sex trafficking survivors to sue businesses that knowingly facilitate their trafficking — including hotels and motels — died under pressure from the industry.

Hotels along I-75, U.S. 41 accused

The 22 hotels and motels named in the lawsuit are clustered along U.S. 41 and at the Interstate 75 interchanges, primarily at Collier Boulevard and Pine Ridge Road.

The hotels tend to be affiliated with chains — Hampton Inn, Holiday Inn Express, Residence Inn by Marriott, La Quinta Inn, Best Western. They're the kinds of places where families might put up out-of-town guests and businesses use for traveling employees. Many have poolside chickee bars, outdoor fire pits and pickleball courts.

The roadside motels, mostly along the East Trail, tend to be small and independently owned.

“This is not just happening in some

dirty part of our town,” Freeman said. “This isn't isolated.”

Sgt. Wade Williams, who heads the Collier County Sheriff's Office's special crimes unit, said traffickers use a variety of hotels and motels in the Naples area.

“We have seen both lower-cost and expensive hotels utilized, though they do seem to prefer lower-cost hotels,” Williams said in an email.

Florida ranks third in the nation in the number of calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, according to the Florida Attorney General's office.

Williams said his unit investigates anywhere from 15 to more than two dozen human trafficking cases each year. Sex trafficking is mostly advertised and arranged online, he said.

Lawsuit based on 2016 bust

The lawsuit stems from a sex trafficking ring the Collier County Sheriff's Office busted in January 2016.

For six months, detectives investigated the ring operated by Keith “Big Mike” Lewis, 62, and Gregory “Bowlegzz” Hines, 38. The two plaintiffs, S.Y. and C.S., were among the women trafficked by Lewis and Hines, Freeman said.

Lewis and Hines used drugs to coerce at least four women, and possibly a dozen more, to perform sex acts for clients, according to Sheriff's Office arrest reports. They used or threatened violence and withheld drugs if the women wouldn't do as they said, investigators said.

Hanlon, one of the two lawyers who filed the suit, said the women weren't paid by Hines and Lewis, but instead were plied with drugs. She said Hines and Lewis intentionally hooked the women on drugs as a method of control.

If the women left, they couldn't get high anymore.

“You can't get heroin 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, anywhere else than in one of these rings,” Freeman said. “And that's the control factor.”

The Sheriff's Office's operation ended early in January 2016 when detectives had to enter a room and rescue a woman who was overdosing at a hotel on Tollgate Boulevard in East Naples.

The woman was fading in and out of consciousness when detectives arrived. In the room, detectives found the bed covered in crack pipes and a paper plate with white powder on top. The woman inside kept repeating herself as she came to.

“They are bad men,” she told detectives. “They kill people.”

Hines and Lewis were sentenced last year to 15 and eight years in prison, respectively, on human trafficking, prostitution, racketeering and drug charges.

Freeman and Hanlon said they waited until after Hines and Lewis were sentenced to file their lawsuit against the men and the hotel companies as to not interfere with the criminal proceedings.

The Naples attorneys first filed separate lawsuits against Gulf Coast Inn Naples and the Inn of Naples on Oct. 30. Freeman and Hanlon then combined the lawsuits and amended their motion to include the owners of the additional hotels and motels in the lawsuit on Dec. 31.

“It was a strategy,” Hanlon said. “We just decided to go for it with all of them. The evidence was there and we decided we had enough information to go for it.”

The \$100 million lawsuit — \$10 million for each of the 10 counts — asks that compensatory damages be awarded to the plaintiffs for past and future damages, such as severe and permanent personal injuries, health care costs and medical monitoring.

The lawsuit also asks that punitive damages be awarded to the plaintiffs because the defendants “demonstrated a complete disregard and reckless indif-

ference for the safety and welfare of the general public and to plaintiffs.”

Owners deny allegations

When asked about the allegations in the lawsuit, spokespeople for the large chain hotels — Marriott International Hilton, Intercontinental Hotels, Choice Hotels and Wyndham Hotels and Resorts — all said they do not comment on pending litigation.

Several of them separately condemned human trafficking in statements to the Daily News.

Hilton, Intercontinental Hotels, Choice Hotels and Wyndham Hotels and Resorts provide human trafficking prevention training, according to their statements.

Several owners of the smaller, independent hotels and motels named in the suit did speak with the Naples Daily News, denying they had anything to do with sex trafficking on their properties.

Geraldine Conti, owner of Conti's Motel near Naples Manor, said she has never permitted illegal activity, whether drugs or sex trafficking, at her business.

She has 40 years of experience in the hotel and motel industry and tries to promote healthy, moral and ethical living as a businesswoman, Conti said. In the past, she has worked with law enforcement to identify and chase out criminals and she keeps a close watch over her property by logging all her guests and their license plates and monitoring security cameras, Conti said.

The lawsuit is an attempt by lawyers to squeeze money out of local businesses and she intends to defend her name against the accusations, Conti said.

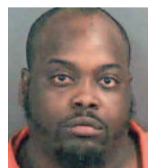
“We're talking about honor now,” Conti said. “I deny this completely. Never happened like this. Never.”

Frank Laporta, owner and manager of the Naples Garden Inn, said there were not enough details in the lawsuit — including the names of the victims or


See **TRAFFICKING, Page 6A**



Lewis




Hines



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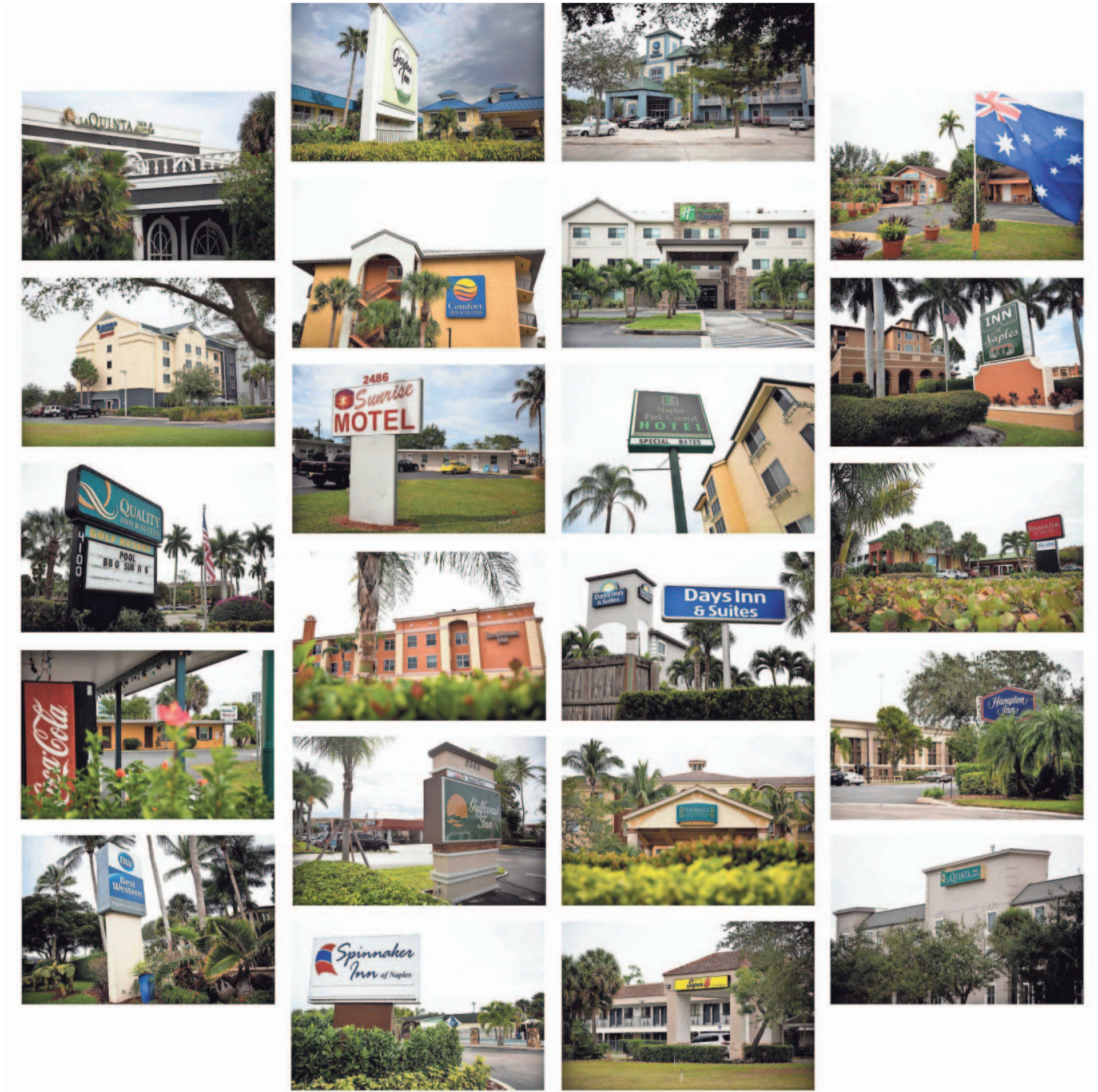
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Sex trafficking lawsuit



Twenty-two Naples-area hotels have been named in a civil lawsuit alleging that they were aware or should have been aware of sex trafficking activity occurring on their properties. ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Trafficking

Continued from Page 5A

the dates they allegedly stayed there — to comment on the allegations. When told the names of the convicted traffickers, Laporta looked up their photos online and said he didn't recognize them. "If there was trafficking and I saw it or somebody here knew it, obviously I would not let it occur," he said. "I don't know what this is pertaining to."

Arturo Aguiles purchased the Sunrise Motel on U.S. 41 East last May, more than three years after the sex trafficking addressed in the lawsuit is alleged to have occurred there. The previous ownership group also is named in the lawsuit. Aguiles called the lawsuit "a legal scam" and said he is offended by it. He described himself as a local investor who bought the motel to diversify his business holdings. He said his goal with the business is to offer guests a 4- or 5-star experience at a 2-star rate. "If I knew I would have this kind of

issue, this kind of problem like sex trafficking, I would think twice to make this investment," Aguiles said. "It's stressful, man. Like, are you kidding me?" Freeman said he isn't surprised the hotel and motel owners deny the allegations. "Nobody wants to admit they're involved with sex trafficking," Freeman said. "There are opportunities now to report sex trafficking. People don't. They don't want to get involved." In addition to working with victims of the Naples-area sex trafficking ring, Freeman said he is working with victims

of trafficking rings operating in Marco Island and Fort Myers. His investigation is expanding to Clearwater and St. Petersburg and east to Orlando, he said. The lawsuits can force hotel and motel companies to become more vigilant when signs of human trafficking are obvious, Freeman said. "What happened after these arrests (of Hines and Lewis)? Nothing," Freeman said. "What we are trying to say is that this can happen to you, Mr. Hotel, and if you all want to continue, Sharon and I will be at your doorstep."

List: Hotels and motels named in local sex trafficking lawsuit

Jake Allen and Ryan Mills
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Two dozen Collier County hotels and motels have been named in a lawsuit that alleges owners and property managers did nothing to stop blatant sex trafficking. As a result, the plaintiffs — two local women identified only by their initials, S.Y. and C.S. — suffered physical and mental pain at the hands of their sex traffickers, according to the lawsuit. Two Naples attorneys, Sharon Hanlon and Yale Freeman, filed the lawsuit in October then amended it in December to add the majority of the hotels and motels as defendants. Freeman said the telltale signs of the sex trafficking were women wearing provocative clothing and wandering the hotel hallways strung out on heroin, and men cycling in and out of the women's hotel rooms that had "do not disturb" signs hung on the door for days.

The women were sex trafficked at the hotels and motels in 2015 and early 2016, according to the lawsuit. Hotel and motel owners said they weren't aware of any sex trafficking at their businesses. Some denied it ever occurred, while others said they could not comment on pending litigation.

Here are establishments named in lawsuit

- Best Western Naples Plaza Hotel (6400 Dudley Drive, Naples)
- Best Western Naples Inn & Suites (2329 9th St. North, Naples)
- Quality Inn & Suites Golf Resort (4100 Golden Gate Parkway, Naples)
- Comfort Inn & Executive Suites (3860 Tollgate Blvd., Naples)
- Hampton Inn Naples-Central (3210 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Hampton Inn Naples-I-75 (2630 Northbrooke Plaza Drive, Naples)
- Holiday Inn Express Naples South - I-75 (3837 Tollgate

- Blvd., Naples)
- Staybridge Suites Naples-Gulf Coast (4805 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Residence Inn by Marriott Naples (4075 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott Naples (3808 White Lake Blvd., Naples)
- La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Naples Downtown (1555 5th Ave. South, Naples)
- La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Naples East (I-75) (185 Bedzel Circle, Naples)
- Days Inn & Suites by Wyndham Bonita Springs North Naples (27991 Oakland Drive, Bonita Springs)
- Super 8 by Wyndham Naples (3880 Tollgate Blvd., Naples)
- Ramada Naples (1100 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Gulfcoast Inn Naples (2555 Tamiami Trail North)
- Inn of Naples (4055 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Naples Garden Inn (2630 Tamiami Trail North, Naples)
- Naples Park Central Hotel (40 9th St. North, Naples)
- Spinnaker Inn of Naples (6600 Dudley Drive, Naples)
- Sunrise Motel (2486 Tamiami Trail East, Naples)
- Conty's Motel (11238 Tamiami Trail East, Naples)
- Tamiami Motel (2164 Tamiami Trail East, Naples)
- Glades Motel (3115 Tamiami Trail East, Naples)