

MINNEAPOLIS

Adult entertainers detail workplace safety hazards in Minneapolis clubs

By Emma Nelson (<http://www.startribune.com/emma-nelson/261800211/>) Star Tribune

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Minneapolis city officials are exploring tougher regulations for strip clubs after two recent investigations revealed health hazards and sometimes dangerous conditions for entertainers.

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The most recent findings, released Monday by the University of Minnesota's Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC), noted performers face on-the-job hazards ranging from injuries sustained during performances to physical and sexual assault, and they have few worker protections. The problems are particularly pronounced in private or semiprivate VIP rooms, and the performers, who are independent contractors, receive little training and can experience financial exploitation.

"This is a legal industry, and workers in a legal industry should have a safe and supportive work environment free from harassment and assault," said Lauren Martin, director of research at UROC and the study's principal investigator. "I think it's possible for this industry to have that."

In response to the report, City Council Member Cam Gordon said he is planning to introduce ordinance amendments boosting regulations for adult venues.

There are 17 licensed adult entertainment establishments in Minneapolis. The report focused on 10 that are considered strip clubs but did not link complaints to individual clubs.

Brian Michael, who owns Augie's Cabaret, said each establishment has the prerogative to remove customers who cause problems.

"People behaving poorly in a public space is a basis for kicking them out," he said. "If there's a problem with communication between entertainers, managers, staff, ownership, that's an internal issue that can only be improved internally."

Owners and managers at other clubs could not be reached or declined to comment.

The report found the most dangerous part of an entertainer's job is working in VIP spaces where customers pay to spend time alone with an entertainer. The secluded areas are big moneymakers — prices range from \$75 for 30 minutes to \$400 for an hour — and customers often expect sexual contact, according to the report.

Customers have been known to use force "if they do not feel they are getting what they paid for," entertainers said.

Entertainers generally choose the work for its flexibility and pay, the report said. An entertainer can earn \$1,000 in a night but pays house fees, fines and tips to club employees and managers — a financial obligation that can consume their earnings.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14908301736327) Dancers waited for customers on a Saturday night in 2012.

Though none of the entertainers who participated in the study said they'd engaged in sexual acts on the job, they reported feeling pressured to cross the line into commercial sex trading. Some clubs ignore commercial sex trading when it happens, the report said; others go so far as to facilitate it, including by allowing pimps and traffickers to recruit on site.

Entertainers are unlikely to contact law enforcement or city officials when problems arise, said Tawnya Konobeck, a burlesque performer who sometimes works in strip clubs and participated in an advisory group that helped inform the UROC study.

"If you're the one who reaches out to an official ... you can easily lose your entire livelihood," she said. "You will be blacklisted from working at any of the clubs if word gets out."

Suggested solutions

The Minneapolis Health Department commissioned the UROC study as part of an effort to reevaluate how it regulates licensed adult entertainment establishments.

Health department officials earlier this month released the results of inspections at all 17 adult establishments, which confirmed bodily fluids at 11 venues. Those venues — 10 of which have VIP spaces — were declared a public health nuisance under state law, and the health department ordered them to clean thoroughly and prevent the recurrence of bodily fluids.

Health department officials say they have little authority over these establishments. The only relevant city ordinance, which regulates "high-risk sexual conduct," is considered outdated.

Though the UROC report doesn't offer specific policy proposals, it includes suggestions from entertainers including more training, opportunities for entertainers to become managers, increased oversight in VIP spaces and support for those who report sexual harassment and assault.

Gordon, who chairs the committee that heard the report Monday, said he wants to involve UROC and entertainers, managers and club owners in ordinance changes. The subject will likely be introduced at the next full City Council meeting, he said.

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