

# Addressing **Barriers to Massage Licensure** for Asian Workers



**Presented by: MPOP**  
(Massage Parlor Organizing Project)

**MESSAGE  
PARLOR  
ORGANIZING  
PROJECT**

# AGENDA

- 01** Introduction
  
- 02** Framing the Issue: From Anti-Trafficking Approach to Labor Approach
  
- 03** Inaccessibility in Massage Licensure
  
- 04** Solutions

# 01. INTRO: WHO IS MPOPOP

We are a grassroots organization based in the Chinatown-ID that supports the needs of migrant Chinese massage workers.



**MPOPOP is an immigrant workers' rights organization.**

**We support the safety of all workers.**

**We oppose all forms of trafficking & forced labor.**

**We believe in the need to address conditions that make people vulnerable to exploitation and forced labor.**

**We believe in labor protections and workers' power as protective factors against trafficking and exploitation.**

**Raids in all forms, increase the vulnerability of immigrant workers.**

# Raids Timeline

## 2018-2019 CID

- 6 arrested
- Owner charged with: \$ laundering, promoting prostitution
- 26 workers questioned by police
- Police narrative: “Rescued 26 women”

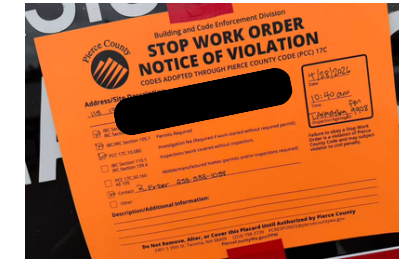
July 2025  
Yakima

Jan 2026  
Everret and  
Marysville

April 2026  
Oregon

April 28, 2026 Tacoma

- at least 45 Asian parlors shut down by fire dept



May 6, 2026  
Kirkland, Bellevue

- 20 parlors inspected by police, 3 raided

May 2023  
White Center

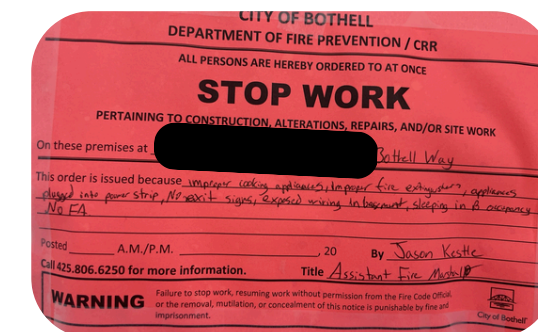
Feb 2025  
Kennewick

Feb 2026  
Shoreline

6 arrested

- 5 Asian parlors violently raided by police + fire dept. for “potential trafficking”
- 1 owner arrested, released the next day (insufficient evidence),
- at least 3 workers lost jobs

April 14, 2026  
Bothell



FIFA (6/15-7/6) Risks: police sweeps, ICE presence justified by “anti-trafficking” prevention

# 02. FRAMING THE ISSUE: WORKERS RIGHTS AS PROTECTIVE FACTORS

**TWO NIGHTS AGO,**

**FIVE ASIAN MASSAGE PARLORS IN BOTHELL WERE RAIDED BY POLICE, CITING "FIRE CODE VIOLATIONS" AND "POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS" TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING.**



**DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE REAL FIRE IS?**

- POLICE RAIDS AND ICE
- CARCERAL ANTI TRAFFICKING
- INACCESSIBLE MASSAGE LICENSURE
- NO WORKER RIGHTS

# TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Trafficking

Exploitation

Sex Work

Unlicensed Massage

Worker's Rights & Labor Protections

# 'Illicit Massage': Conflating Trafficking, Sex Work, and Unlicensed Massage

## Trafficking

- carceral law-enforcement led anti-trafficking  
→ increased vulnerability of workers to labor exploitation due to fears of criminalization

## Sex Work

- criminalizing sex work
- sting operations
- prostitution charges vs. trafficking

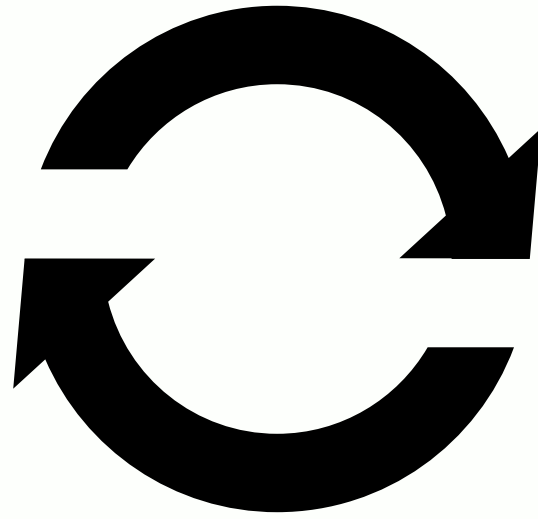
## Unlicensed Massage

- used as 'evidence' of trafficking  
→ disregards the systemic barriers to massage licensure for non-English-speaking workers

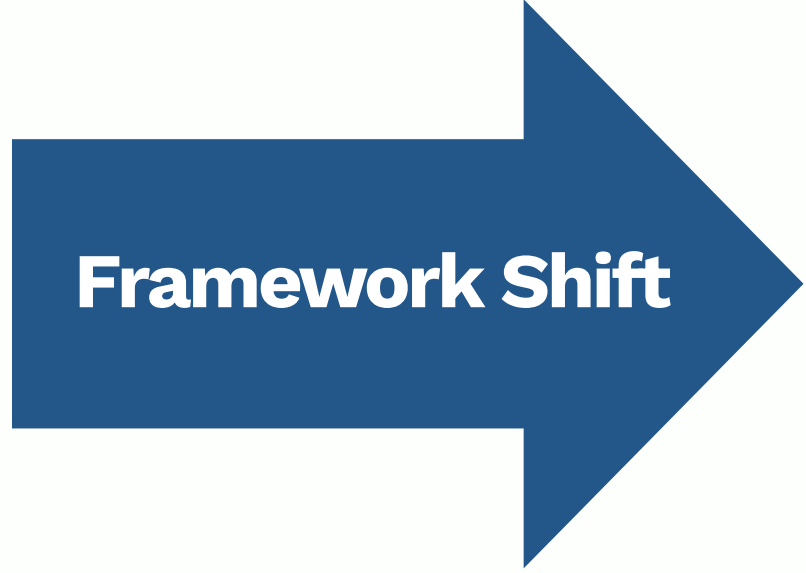
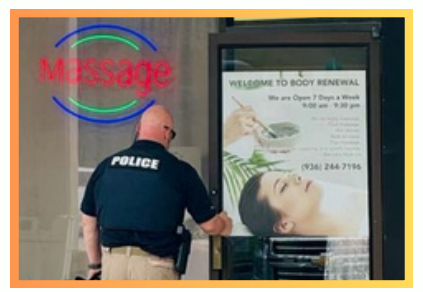
Carceral approaches exacerbate risks of crimmigration

Unlicensed workers  
confronted with **potential  
of criminalization vs  
rescue binary**

(unlicensed conflated with  
sex work **vs** trafficking  
victims)



This binary drives workers  
deeper into precarious  
work/living conditions that  
**increase their vulnerability  
to exploitation**



# LABOR, WORKERS' RIGHTS ISSUE

Address root causes

Centers worker autonomy

Anti-carceral approach

Preventative framework better  
serves both autonomous workers  
& potential trafficking survivors

# 03. INACCESSIBILITY IN MASSAGE LICENSURE

## BARRIERS

- Lack of language accommodations (licensure exam, training schools)
- Vulnerability to scams
- Cost: \$13-17K tuition, 625+ hours

## IMPACTS

Criminalization →  
Economic Hardship, Deportation

Unsafe working conditions →  
Exposure to trafficking, labor exploitation

Barriers to autonomy, safety, & health

# 04. SOLUTIONS

## ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION AS PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGY

- Recreational body work, relaxation & wellness practice
- Precedents:
  - Birth doula licensing ([ESHB 1881](#))
  - successful completion of congruent ancestral practices
  - alternatives to demonstrating competencies for licensing, eg. massage workers' years of experience and client testimony
- Other states have alternative licensure for body work

## ADDRESSING EXISTING INEQUITIES IN MASSAGE LICENSURE PROCESS

- language access for exams
- scholarships for training schools

# THANK YOU.

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