

While city leaders look the other way

Spot a massage parlor in San Francisco, and chances are 1 in 3 that the storefront operation is a brothel. The women working inside are often near-captives, lured in many cases from Asia with false promises of good-paying jobs.

It's no secret — not to city leaders or law enforcement — yet next to nothing is done about this flagrant trade and the sex trafficking behind it. Federal agents and city vice squad officers have made arrests but barely dented the problem. These busts rarely lead to parlor shut-downs.

A lone city health inspector, charged with checking on safety and hygiene rules, turns in reports indicating the lingerie-clad hostesses, mirrored walls and bubbling hot tubs are part of anything but a health-oriented business. His city department sidesteps the warning signs and arrest reports, saying its role is to oversee health licenses, not prostitution laws.

Meanwhile, the businesses, concentrated in the downtown and Tenderloin areas, continue to operate. How brazen is it?

On a ride-along with city investigators two years ago, Mayor Gavin Newsom walked through the door of one operation and encountered a sex act between a female employee and male customer. That it happened not once, but twice. One of the businesses, by the way, is still open.

Why the disconnect between city laws and this illegal sex trade? Because City Hall lacks the will and leadership in a pass-the-buck tangle of excuse making. For years, little beyond talk was directed at the issue.

Start with the mayor, whose two encounters qualify him as a veteran in the brothel wars. He stood outside the Sun Spa on Geary Boulevard last October and denounced the business as a "slave camp" because of the treatment endured by the immigrant women indoors.

He's entirely right, but he needs to follow through. His staff is now taking the first steps to shut down the so-called spas, health clubs and rub-down parlors. Possibly next month, landlords and business operators at locations where police have made arrests will get warning letters.

The next step will be passage of new laws making the lines of authority clearer in who is responsible for cracking down on the sex trade.

That means getting planning, police, health, city attorney and district attorney offices all on the same page.

Supervisor Carmen Chu was galvanized to take preliminary action this month after police busted the Vicente Fitness and Health Care Center a half a block from an elementary school in the Sunset District she represents. It was the second arrest at the

club since October. Her goal, like the mayor's, is to come up with either new city codes or law enforcement direction that will end the bureaucratic run-around.

One of her ideas: Multiple arrests at one business should automatically revoke a massage license, and not oblige the city to go through lengthy hearings and court filings to do the same.

There are numerous excuses for the city's inept performance. To name a few: City Hall has too little money in a severe budget crisis to spend on expensive court actions needed to target massage parlor operators.

Also, police arrests of masseuse-prostitutes often aren't enough to prove that business operators are behind the conduct. In addition, as mentioned, the health department is ill-equipped to make a judgment on a criminal matter.

Underlying these bureaucratic reasons is San Francisco itself. Here, prostitution is given a soft, Holly Golightly image as a victimless crime, meaning it rates a low priority.

Also, the parlors are generally windowless storefronts in commercial areas, making them fairly unobtrusive. City voters turned down a ballot measure last November to decriminalize prostitution, but there are few rallies to go after the brothel business.

But none of these explanations holds water. The issue is about bureaucratic ineptitude and sex trafficking, neither of which should be tolerated. The failure to act is a glaring mistake that cuts across pledges of fair treatment, women's rights, efficient government and legal duty. It's time to go after these brothels and stop the excuses.