

Cab driver sex trafficking bill passed by Council

by {ga=kkilawan}

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A sex trafficking victim testifies anonymously at Council hearing in December 2011. Photo by William Alatraste.

NEW YORK — Cab drivers caught willingly transporting sex trafficking victims could face a fine of \$10,000 and have their license automatically revoked under legislation passed by the City Council today.

The legislation passed at the Council's stated meeting also calls on the Taxi and Limousine Commission to develop a program to educate city-licensed drivers on laws prohibiting the use of taxis for trafficking.

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"We are recognizing in this legislation the unconscionable and cruel role that taxi drivers and livery drivers are playing in this brutal attack that keeps people trapped, takes their lives away from them," Council Speak Christine Quinn said at a news conference before the legislation was passed.

Advocates for victims of sex trafficking said the legislation targets both traffickers and demand.

"Taxi drivers and livery drivers are often middlemen between trafficked people and the customers that create the demand," said Sonia Ossorio, president of [National Organization of Women New York City](#).

Currently, city-licensed taxi drivers could face a hearing if they commit a sex trafficking crime.

Lawmakers call for NYPD oversight

Lawmakers introduced legislation at the City Council's stated meeting to create an inspector general with subpoena powers over the nation's largest police department.

With criticism mounting daily on the New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk and surveillance policies, sponsors of the bill said the aim was to create independent oversight of the law enforcement agency.

The measure, introduced earlier today by Councilmen Jumaane Williams and Brad Lander, would create an inspector general to conduct investigations and review NYPD policies and operations. He or she would also make recommendations and deliver regular reports to the mayor, police commissioner, City Council and the public.

Lander said they looked at the work of inspectors general on the federal and local levels to draft the legislation. They also reviewed police oversight models in other big cities and the operations of other inspector generals in New York City.

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"Inspectors general have worked in New York City a lot of times, have worked at the federal level, have worked in a lot of places. There's a good framework for doing it," Lander said. "It just made a lot of sense."

The mayor and police commissioner have previously said the department does not need increased oversight.

--*Cristian Salazar*

TLC spokesman Allan Fromberg said the agency was working with the Council to develop the educational component of the legislation. "The TLC will develop the most effective, and most cost-effective, program possible once the bill becomes law," he said.

[In April, Manhattan prosecutors charged a father and his son](#) with running a sex-trafficking ring, with livery cab drivers transporting prostitutes and arranging meetings with clients. The father and son, who have pleaded not guilty, were accused of threatening violence against the women for being late or failing to meet quotas.

Advocates said the case had highlighted the problem of livery drivers aiding sex trafficking.

Dorchen Leidholt, the legal director of [Sanctuary for Families](#), a leading nonprofit that helps victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking, said a growing number of its clients had been "victimized not only by their traffickers but by drivers who were driving them from customer to customer, taking half the money that was earned and working very closely with the traffickers."

Bharavai Desai, the executive director of the Taxi Workers Alliance, said unlicensed cab drivers were most often linked to such crimes.

"There is no iota of evidence linking yellow medallion taxi cabs to sex trafficking," she said. "They are scapegoating our name. The City Council should address the issue but not scapegoat

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or link illegal services to legal services."

The Council also passed [a resolution](#), created by 23 council members, that strongly recommends that the state Legislature pass the [Trafficking Victims Protection and Justice Act](#)

[Trafficki](#)

. If passed, the bill would amend a 2007 anti-trafficking law that the Council resolution says does not go far enough.

The bill would remove the need for prosecutors to prove that underage victims of trafficking were coerced into prostitution; elevate penalties for patronizing underage prostitutes to the level of statutory rape; and require that anyone under 18 arrested for a prostitution offense be tried in family court rather than criminal court.