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THROUGH A CLOSED WINDOW

COVID-19 outbreak widens distance for families, older relatives



Kathy Jacobsen signals to her mother, Audrey Watson, 80, who has dementia, through the glass pane of a door at Arbor Rose Senior Care in Mesa on April 1. Because of concerns that a coronavirus outbreak could occur at the facility, Jacobsen was taking her mother out of the facility and moving her mother in with her at her Gilbert home. Jacobsen had not been able to visit her mother inside the facility because of the coronavirus pandemic since early March. PHOTOS BY DAVID WALLACE/THE REPUBLIC

Alden Woods Arizona Republic | USA TODAY NETWORK

Her mother was waiting in the window, but Kathy Jacobsen couldn't see her face. She was all nervous hands and thinning gray hair, her flat expression covered by a paper sign that was taped to the front door's ornate oval window. It read, simply, "STOP." ■ A hand appeared, pressed softly against the glass. Kathy touched the same place. Their hands didn't meet. ■ "Hold on, Momma," she said. She lifted a grocery bag of her mom's favorites, a doughnut and a jug of sweet tea, and waved it in front of the window. "I've got goodies for you."

Audrey Watson, 80, couldn't hear her. She tugged at the door handle. It didn't move. The doors had been locked for weeks.

"Hold on, Momma," Kathy said again. She squinted through a set of blinds, searching the lobby for somebody who could open the door. The handle rattled harder. "Hold on, Momma," Kathy said. "Hold on."

They'd been holding on for three weeks now, ever since Mesa's Arbor Rose Senior Care, where Audrey lived with dementia, closed its doors to the outside world. The new coronavirus had stalked through nursing homes across the country, killing elderly residents by the dozen. The only way to contain the virus was to keep it out entirely. That meant locking visitors like Kathy out — and penning residents like Audrey inside.

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Watson pets Buddy the dog at Jacobsen's home on April 1. Jacobsen had just moved her mother out of Arbor Rose Senior Care due to concerns that an outbreak could occur at the facility. "Obviously I have a fear," Jacobsen said. "If the virus gets into her facility, she may not make it."

ICE agents in Arizona paid for sex acts

DHS policy violated in
trafficking investigation

Daniel Gonzalez Arizona Republic
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Lake Havasu City Police Department began receiving complaints in May 2016 about local massage parlors: Women working at some of the businesses, according to the tipsters, were secretly providing sex for cash.

Detectives discovered ads on websites known for prostitution services, like rubmaps.com and backpage.com, that seemed to back up the tips. The ads showed pictures of young Asian women barely clothed with descriptions like "Hot and Sexy" or "New Asian Girl."

Detectives zeroed in on several massage parlors in Lake Havasu City, Bullhead City and Fort Mohave, three neighboring communities in rural western Arizona near the Nevada state line, all within a two-hour drive of Las Vegas.

It soon became apparent to the Lake Havasu City and Bullhead City detectives that something more nefarious than prostitution appeared to be taking place at the massage parlors: human trafficking. Detectives suspected the women working at the massage businesses were being trafficked from China to the U.S. and then forced to work in the sex trade against their will.

To prove that, police detectives decided they were going to need help.

In April 2018, the Lake Havasu Police Department contacted U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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Inside today

Find a special section on Earth Day, available exclusively for home-delivery subscribers.

NO REGRETS VALLEY & STATE, 1D



Russell Pearce, main architect of the controversial immigration enforcement bill SB 1070, still believes "it was the right thing to do." NICK OZA/THE REPUBLIC

USA TODAY

Governors feel pressure

Governors eager to rescue economies and feeling heat from demonstrators and President Trump are moving to ease COVID-19 restrictions, even as experts warn moving too fast could be disastrous. 8A

90 degrees approaching

The Valley is expected to see its first 90-degree weather for the year as early as Wednesday. 3A

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Agents

Continued from Page 1A

The federal agency's Homeland Security Investigation division, known as ICE HSI, specializes in investigating human trafficking cases.

What happened next is shocking: Undercover ICE HSI agents, with approval from supervisors, paid for sex acts with women at the massage parlors, according to police and court records obtained by The Arizona Republic through public records requests.

Records show that undercover ICE HSI special agents, working under the supervision of ICE's Yuma office, paid for sex acts at least 13 separate times at six massage parlors in western Arizona, ostensibly to help build a human trafficking case against the ringleaders.

The undercover HSI agents described in explicit detail the sex acts they paid for in official reports they submitted as part of the investigation.

The agents visited some of the same massage parlors more than once, the records show.

The undercover agents violated the agency's policy, inquiries by The Republic revealed. The female human trafficking victims should have been offered assistance, not asked to participate in sex acts.

In addition, The Republic found: Supervisors signed off daily on the reports, the records show, suggesting that direct supervisors, and possibly supervisors at higher levels, not only were aware of the actions by undercover ICE HSI agents but also had approved the operation.

If standard protocols and procedures were followed, senior ICE HSI managers from headquarters in Washington, D.C., should have known about the operation in advance.

Prosecutors ultimately dismissed charges against the main defendants as ICE officials refused to make agents available to testify in court and the case unraveled.

Despite the ethical breaches, until recently an eight-day unpaid suspension was the most severe disciplinary action taken against any ICE HSI agents or supervisors, according to a longtime ICE official.

The ill-fated investigation was dubbed "Operation Asian Touch," the records show.

What happened at the parlors

Records obtained from the Lake Havasu Police Department, the Bullhead City Police Department and Mohave County Superior Court detail what happened during the investigation of massage parlors in Bullhead City and Fort Mohave.

Undercover agents paid for sex acts during eight visits to massage parlors in Bullhead City and Fort Mojave on May 30, 2018, and May 31, 2018, the records show.

Undercover agents paid for sex acts during three additional visits to massage parlors in the same communities on Sept. 17, 2018, the records show.

Undercover agents paid for sex acts at least two separate times at massage parlors in May and June 2018 in Lake Havasu City, the records show.

The records show undercover agents stripped down to their socks and underwear after negotiating prices for massages with women at the businesses. While providing massages, the women offered to perform sex acts, including manual stimulation, oral sex and intercourse, the records show.

The agents negotiated with the women for manual stimulation but not oral sex or intercourse, the records show. Agents paid between \$30 and \$120 for each of the sex acts, the records show.

The undercover agents allowed the women to touch their penises but then came up with excuses to leave before ejaculation, such as "running late for work," or because they could not concentrate because of "a jealous wife," the records show.

After agreeing to pay \$80 for manual stimulation, one undercover agent paid an extra \$10 for a woman at one massage business to also show him her breasts in order to "stop the female from stroking his penis," the records show.

During two of the visits, undercover agents agreed separately to pay \$80 and \$120, respectively, for the women at massage parlors to take off their clothes while the agents were being touched, the records show.

ICE: Agents violated DHS policy

Information about undercover ICE HSI special agents paying for sex acts as part of a human trafficking investigation first was revealed Dec. 19, 2019, by Today's News-Herald in Lake Havasu.

At the time, ICE officials declined to comment on the undercover agents' actions. In a written statement provided to Today's News-Herald, Yasmene Pitts O'Keefe, an ICE spokeswoman in Phoenix, said, "Our trained law enforcement professionals adhere to the Department's mission and uphold our laws while continuing to provide our nation with safety and security."

But in an unusual admission of wrongdoing, ICE officials now admit that special agents involved in the in-

vestigation violated HSI policy.

"HSI is committed to placing the safety of potential victims at the forefront of every investigation," Pitts O'Keefe said in a written statement in response to questions from The Republic. "Conduct by a limited number of HSI agents involved in the investigation was not consistent with HSI policy."

Information about the agents' conduct was referred to ICE's Office of Professional Responsibility for action, the statement said.

"A thorough investigation of the alleged misconduct and failure to follow policy was undertaken by ICE OPR," the statement said. "The findings of that investigation were provided to ICE's Disciplinary and Adverse Action Panel to determine the appropriate disciplinary and/or correction actions."

ICE officials refused to say whether any HSI agents or supervisors were disciplined or what any discipline entailed. The agency also refused The Republic's request for the names of any agents or supervisors disciplined.

"Due to strict privacy and agency rulings, details regarding the names, titles statement said. "The findings of that investigation were provided to ICE's Disciplinary and Adverse Action Panel to determine the appropriate disciplinary and/or correction actions."

The Republic separately filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act asking the agency to release information about disciplinary action taken against ICE HSI agents involved in the undercover human trafficking operation. That request also was denied by the agency, citing privacy reasons.

ICE officials also refused to answer questions about whether the agents who paid for sex acts received prior approval for the operation from upper-level supervisors and, if so, whether that approval extended as high as supervisors at ICE HSI headquarters in Washington, D.C.

But one former high-level ICE HSI supervisor says senior-level managers should have known about the undercover operation involving agents paying for sex and questions of how the operation ever was allowed to go forward.

"Part of HSI's mission is to investigate human trafficking, and the agency's primary focus in these types of cases are the victims," said Louie Garcia, a former senior ICE executive who retired in 2017 as the deputy special agent in charge of ICE HSI's operations in Arizona after a 31-year career as a federal agent.

"In this case, the opposite actually took place. (The agency) actually forced the victims."

He said he decided to speak out because of his outrage over the botched investigation and on behalf of HSI agents still working for the agency who were angry about what had happened.

Garcia said he was told by agents within ICE HSI that as of recently only one agent, a group supervisor who oversaw the undercover agents, was suspended without pay as a result of the internal investigation, although he said other ICE agents may have received lesser disciplinary action.

That supervisor was suspended for eight days without pay, according to Garcia.

Garcia believes the disciplinary action was not enough. The case should have been presented to the U.S. Attorney's Office for possible criminal prosecution, he said.

Glenn McCormick, a spokesman for U.S. Attorney's Office for Arizona, said an OPR agent did make a "brief" call to an assistant U.S. attorney about the case but did not present written findings of the internal investigation, and nothing came of it.

"The OPR agent made the duty AUSA aware of certain limited alleged acts from a state investigation, and inquired about whether those acts violated federal law," McCormick said in an email. "There was no known federal law violation for the limited alleged acts discussed during the brief call."

Garcia said the undercover agents should have known that paying for sex acts as part of a human trafficking investigation was against the agency's policy.

"There is no question to me that they should have known. They knew," Garcia said. "Undercover agents, number one, are certified to work undercover. ... When you go through undercover training, and you are certified, you receive training as to what you can and can't do."

He said undercover operations typically are initiated by supervisors from the local HSI office and senior managers in Washington, D.C., to protect the safety of undercover agents and to ensure taxpayer dollars are being properly spent. So senior HSI managers must have known undercover agents were paying for sex acts and allowed the operation to take place, he said.

"In operations involving undercover operations, there is strict oversight of those operations from Washington on down," Garcia said. "Why? Because we are putting agents' lives in danger. When an operation is executed, we need to know that everything was planned, and contingencies are addressed," Garcia said. "So before an agent goes out on an undercover operation, it's been blessed from the top down. The chain of command, from the first line supervisor to the as-

sistant special agent in charge, to the deputy special agent in charge to the special agent in charge in Arizona are made aware of it, and they know the outcome of each and every undercover contact."

Scott Brown is the special agent in charge of ICE's HSI operations in Arizona. The deputy special agent in charge is Lon Weigand. Angel Ortiz is the assistant special agent in charge of the Yuma office of ICE HSI.

In 2018, at the time of the operation, Thomas Homan, now retired, served as the acting director of ICE after being appointed to the position by President Donald Trump.

Investigating human trafficking is one of the main missions of ICE HSI.

The agency's agents "around the globe work to uncover, dismantle and disrupt human trafficking," according to ICE's website. "They come face to face with the worst of humanity — traffickers profiting off the forced labor and commercial sex of their victims using physical and sexual abuse, threats of harm and deportation, false promises, economic and psychological manipulation, and threats."

The agency even launched a major effort to draw public attention to the horrors of human trafficking, called the Blue Campaign. The campaign features hundreds of posts on social media to help the public identify signs of human trafficking, often compared with modern-day slavery.

"What is forced labor?" asks one post on Twitter. "Forceful labor occurs when individuals are compelled to provide work or services through the use of force, fraud or coercion."

The human trafficking investigation involving undercover agents paying women for sex acts has tarnished the agency's work, Garcia said.

"HSI has a very important mission and, overall, they do a great job," Garcia said. Human trafficking "is a huge problem in the United States and throughout the world. ... What bothers me, Number One, is the complete lack of oversight not only at the local level but all the way to Washington, D.C. and, Number Two, the agency victimized these victims by performing unauthorized activity."

Charges dismissed

Meanwhile, the two-year investigation into human trafficking at massage parlors in western Arizona has fallen apart, primarily because of the conduct of the undercover HSI agents.

HSI special agents from the Yuma office received information from the Lake Havasu City Police Department on April 20, 2018, about a potential human trafficking case, Pitts O'Keefe said in the agency statement.

ICE HSI initiated a joint investigation with assistance from the Lake Havasu City and Bullhead City police departments to determine if certain massage parlors were violating any human trafficking or other immigration laws, the statement said.

On Sept. 20, 2018, ICE HSI agents, along with officers from the Lake Havasu City and Bullhead City departments, executed warrants at massage parlors and private residences in the Lake Havasu/Fort Mojave and Bullhead City areas.

Search warrants were executed at these massage parlors, records show:

- Body Spa, Bullhead City
- #1 Foot Massage, Bullhead City
- A Beautiful Spa, Bullhead City
- Sun Massage, Fort Mohave
- Asian Massage No. 1, Fort Mohave
- Foot and Massage Spa, Lake Havasu City

- Body Spa, Lake Havasu City
- Asian Spa, Lake Havasu City
- Jin's Massage, Lake Havasu City

Five days later, ICE HSI officials held a joint news conference at the Lake Havasu City Police Department to tout they had busted a human trafficking ring and in the process rescued two victims.

"These women were working in excess of 12 hours a day, seven days a week in these parlors," said Weigand, the ICE HSI's deputy special agent in charge of Arizona, according to The Bee, a local news outlet that covered the news conference. "The female boss and her husband would come by the massage parlors unannounced and collect the money that the women made. The only income these women had were the tips they received for performing the massages and sexual acts."

Weigand did not disclose that undercover agents paid for sex acts with the victims as part of the investigation.

Weigand announced that eight people were arrested as a result of the investigation, including two people accused of being the ringleaders: Amanda Yamauchi, now 48, of Bullhead City, and her boyfriend, Dean Michael Bassett, now 53.

Yamauchi and Bassett were charged with conspiracy to commit sex trafficking and benefiting from a sex trafficking venture, both class 2 felonies, according to the indictment.

Yamauchi was charged with multiple additional felonies, according to the indictment, including sex trafficking, trafficking of persons for forced labor or services, unlawfully obtaining labor or services, procuring or placing persons in house of prostitution, receiving earnings of prostitution, operating or main-

taining a house of prostitution, and money laundering.

All charges against Yamauchi and Bassett were dismissed Dec. 17 in Mohave County Superior Court, according to Mohave Deputy County Attorney Kellen Marlow.

Felony charges also were dismissed in December against two other defendants in the case, Shui Mei Ching and Yuhin Shu, Marlow said. Both cases were dismissed Dec. 30, court records show.

Ching faced money laundering and prostitution, among other charges, and Shu faced charges of operating or maintaining a house of prostitution and money laundering, court records show.

Earlier, three other defendants pleaded guilty to more minor charges in connection with the case, Marlow said.

Marlow said the charges were dismissed against the alleged ringleaders after ICE HSI refused to make the agents who took part in the undercover investigation available to testify in court.

Marlow could not say when prosecutors learned that undercover HSI agents had paid for sex acts as part of the investigation because he wasn't the original prosecutor in charge of the case.

He said he did not learn of the HSI agents' actions until after he inherited the cases from former Mohave County prosecutor Megan McCoy, who left the Mohave County Attorney's Office in August. In August, McCoy was appointed court commissioner of the Mohave County Superior Court.

McCoy said she learned HSI agents had paid for sex during debriefings while the investigation was still going on, but the agents had told her the actions were allowed under the agency's policy.

She acknowledged having misgivings about the agents' actions but said they were trumped by a desire to criminally prosecute those running the human trafficking organization, which she said involved moving women around the country from one massage parlor to another and subjecting them to sexual abuse daily.

Once the case was handed to her and she learned the full scope of the HSI agents' actions, she said she agreed to move forward and prosecute the case knowing that an ICE internal investigation had been launched to look into the agents' conduct.

"My option was to fully ignore all of the abuses against these victims or proceed with the criminal charges I had against these parlors," McCoy said.

After inheriting the case, Marlow said he looked into how human trafficking investigations are supposed to be conducted and realized this one had been done improperly.

It became apparent that the actions by the HSI agents would look bad in front of a jury at trial, so he agreed to dismiss the charges against the four key defendants, he said.

"Did I think it was appropriate? Absolutely not," Marlow said. "If this case were to have proceeded to the trial, I would have expressed my own disgust to the jury, but also at least I would have attempted to convince the jury that, yes, this is awful, but what the defendants were doing was also awful as well."

The tragedy, he acknowledged, is that the case fell apart.

"I totally agree," Marlow said. "I learned, frankly, the way this was done was not going to bear the type of fruit that, frankly, we were looking for as relates to a conviction or evidence that would stick that would go towards a conviction."

Agents: Allowed to pay for sex

The aftermath of the botched investigation has prompted other questions, including whether the Lake Havasu City and Bullhead City police departments knew HSI agents were paying for sex acts as part of the joint investigation.

And if they did, why didn't they raise objections?

Both police departments have policies that prohibit officers from participating in sex acts while on duty, including undercover operations, and none of their officers paid for sex as part of the investigation, according to Lake Havasu City police spokesman Sgt. Tom Gray and Bullhead City police spokeswoman Emily Fromelt.

Gray said HSI took the lead in the investigation and undercover officers operated under HSI policies. HSI agents told police investigators that under the agency's policy, they are allowed to participate in sex acts while undercover, Gray said.

"This information came from HSI agents involved in the case and only became known to Chief (Dan) Doyle after the investigation was dismissed," Gray said in an email.

Bullhead City detectives also were also informed by HSI that the undercover sexual activity was authorized, Fromelt said in an email.

"It was BHPD detectives' understanding that the HSI agents were operating under their own policies and procedures," she said.

Eugene O'Donnell, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and a former police officer

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

and state prosecutor in New York City, said most law enforcement agencies have policies that prohibit officers from engaging in sex acts as part of undercover operations.

Ethically, it would be difficult ever to justify allowing law enforcement officers to pay for sex acts, especially in cases involving human trafficking victims. And then only as a last resort after all other options had been considered and exhausted, such as using confidential informants, wiretaps or pursuing a tax evasion or another sort of criminal case.

"This is not your typical massage parlor case," O'Donnell said. "Your typical massage parlor case, arguably the women are workers. In this case, the government is alleging these are victims. And so in order to stop them from being victims, you have to victimize them to stop them from being victims. ... Assume that you ever get to that, I think you have to demonstrate, you should demonstrate, that you've exhausted any other reasonable way to bring this ring down."

Ultimately, O'Donnell said, it's the prosecutor's job to ask questions and raise red flags before investigations move forward to stop nonviable investigations from proceeding.

"In this case, you are saying these women needed to be rescued, and in the name of rescuing them, they were victimized by government agents. That's not that it couldn't ever be allowable. But you have to have a compelling reason and you really have to show clarity as to how you thought this case through," he said.

O'Donnell questioned whether the ICE HSI agents involved in this case may have felt pressure to cut corners to build up human trafficking statistics.

'Frankly, I was shocked'

Criminal defense attorneys were the first people outside the investigation to learn that undercover HSI agents had paid for sex acts. The HSI agents' actions were recorded in police records disclosed by prosecutors to defense attorneys as part of the routine discovery process.

Michael Wozniak, a Kingman defense attorney who initially represented Dean Bassett, said he received both written summaries and hours of audio recordings of HSI agents working undercover at the massage parlors.

At first, Wozniak, now based in Flagstaff, said he could not believe what he heard on the audio recordings.

"It was later in the day. I was in my office listening to it," Wozniak said. "I was basically just giving it a review and I heard, frankly, what I expected to hear initially. They talked about engaging in sexual acts. Then the talking stopped."

"Then I heard noises consistent with somebody engaged in a sexual act," Wozniak said. "Frankly, I was shocked."

Wozniak said he shut the door to his office. After replaying the audio he called the prosecutor, McCoy.

"She confirmed that I was actually hearing what I believed I was hearing," Wozniak said.

Wozniak said he has represented defendants in several undercover sex crime cases and police officers never have engaged in sex acts.

In previous cases he worked on, police officers typically negotiate a sex act, pay the money and then find an excuse to leave. Negotiating and paying for the act usually provide sufficient evidence to make an arrest, he said.

"I have worked a number of sex crime cases. I have worked a number of undercover sting operations like this. And I've never had, you know, never experienced an officer going through with a sexual act. And I'll be frank with you. My first thought, well, other than shock, at what I was hearing was it reminded me of a 'Wire' episode," Wozniak said, referring to the television crime drama series.

Brad Rideout, a Lake Havasu City defense lawyer, initially represented Yamauchi and, later, Shu.

After reading police reports revealing that HSI undercover agents had paid for sex, Rideout filed a motion in Mohave County Superior Court requesting that the agency provide the full names, badge numbers and other information to identify the undercover agents, known only as "Arturo" and "Sergio."

"It is unclear how an ICE officer having sexual relations with human trafficking victims in Mohave County, Arizona protects the nation from terrorist attack or secures the border," Rideout wrote in the court motion.

Josephine Hallam, a Phoenix defense lawyer who took over Yamauchi's case from Rideout, tried to get ICE to turn over the agency's policy to find out whether agents are allowed or prohibited from engaging in sex acts during undercover investigations.

ICE refused to provide any of the information, including the names and identities of the agents, or the policy, they said.

"Could not get that from Homeland Security," Hallam said. "Couldn't get the policy. Couldn't get their names, their badge numbers. I couldn't get anything." Hallam now believes the undercover

agents committed crimes by having sex with women suspected of being human trafficking victims. She believes the agents should be prosecuted.

"You would think they would run in and free the women, first of all. You wouldn't think they would revictimize the women. You wouldn't think they would spend taxpayer money to pay the women for sex. You wouldn't think they would be on salary to go have sex with people who are allegedly kidnapped being forced into it," Hallam said. "It's astounding."

Which raises one more question. What happened to the human trafficking victims after the case fell apart?

Pitts O'Keefe, the ICE spokeswoman, only would say that "to date, no one has been removed from the U.S."

In the statement, Pitts O'Keefe said the agency "employs a victim-centered approach, where the greatest value is placed on the identification and stabilization of victims, as we pursue the investigation and prosecution of traffickers."

The agency has conducted hundreds of trainings and presentations to educate the public, businesses and other law enforcement agencies to identify human trafficking indicators "and will continue to focus and prioritize the potential victims as we conduct human trafficking investigations in Arizona," the statement said.

Gray, the Lake Havasu City Police Department spokesman, said, "The victims, in this case, were put in contact with a victim's advocate to provide assistance." None of the female defendants charged were alleged victims, he said. Gray also said the massage parlors closed after the search warrants were served and have not reopened, except possibly one in Bullhead City.

Typically, human trafficking victims are offered assistance by ICE HSI, including victim-witness assistance, which could lead to visas to remain in the U.S.

"Were the victims offered the appropriate assistance that the agency is required to offer? Were they allowed to remain in the country or were they deported back to their respective countries?" Garcia said.

"But more importantly, this criminal organization that was conducting this activity, nothing happened to them," Garcia added. "And I would ask, are they still conducting this criminal activity? Maybe not in the same area. Did they move somewhere else and are continuing to victimize others?"

Reach the reporter at daniel.gonzalez@arizonarepublic.com.

San Diego Comic-Con canceled over virus

Lindsey Bahr ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — This year's San Diego Comic-Con has been canceled because of coronavirus-related restrictions around large gatherings. Organizers said they are planning for the festival to return in July 2021.

The annual confab was scheduled to take place from July 23 through July 26 in and around the San Diego Convention Center. California Gov. Gavin Newsom said Tuesday that he was not optimistic about a return of "mass gatherings" for things such as sporting events, concerts and fairs in 2020.

"Continuous monitoring of health advisories and recent statements by the Governor of California have made it clear that it would not be safe to move forward with plans for this year," organizers said in a statement Friday.

Comic-Con attracts more than 135,000 people — often elaborately costumed — to the Gaslamp District every year for the comic book convention that last year celebrated its 50th anniversary. Social distancing would be difficult to manage at the convention, which is infamous for its long lines and crowded rooms. It is not uncommon for thousands of people to gather in a single room for a panel discussion, and the exhibit hall is usually jam-packed with people perusing the merchandise.

The convention center is also being used as a temporary homeless shelter as a measure to help curb the spread of the virus.

In March, Comic-Con organizers postponed its smaller Anaheim, Calif.-based event WonderCon, which had been set to take place in mid-April. A version of the event took place online instead.

But Comic-Con organizers were slow to make any official decisions regarding their largest event, which is a huge money-maker for the restaurants and hotels of San Diego, and an important promotional stop for Hollywood television and films. The event is estimated to generate more than \$147 million for the local economy each year.

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