

Personal Service
Establishment &
Body Rub Parlour
Bylaws in Markham
2026





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WHO WE ARE

Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Support Network) is led by Asian migrant massage workers and sex workers. Butterfly organizes and supports workers through outreach, crisis intervention, and access to health, social, and legal services. We provide information and training to help build workers' capacity, leadership, and power — equipping them to speak out and advocate for their rights.

Butterfly has played a key role in exposing the harms of the anti-trafficking movement and has built a strong network of workers across Ontario, including in Toronto, London, Peel Region, York Region, and Hamilton. These workers share their voices, experiences, and stories — not only of oppression, but also of agency and resilience — demonstrating the importance of grassroots leadership within the community. To learn more about Butterfly, please visit our [website](#).

The **HIV Legal Network** promotes the human rights of people living with HIV or AIDS and other populations disproportionately affected by HIV, punitive laws and policies, and criminalization, in Canada and internationally. We do this through research and analysis, litigation and other advocacy, public education, and community mobilization. For more information about the HIV Legal Network, please visit our [website](#).



Note: Information is current as of March 2026; please check for updates as policies may change.



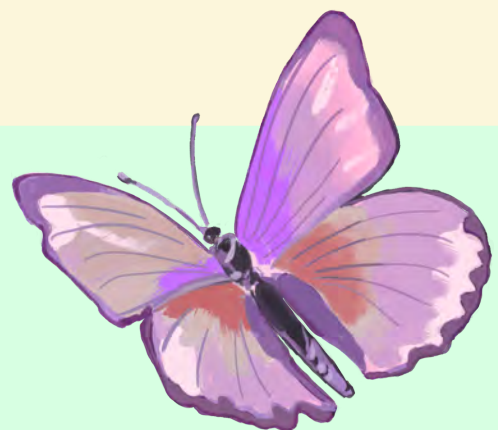
ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document provides information, tips, and guidance for massage parlour (spa) workers and owners. This document identifies important licensing requirements, applicable fees, and regulations enforced by the City of Markham.

BACKGROUND

Asian massage services are deeply rooted in cultural heritage and provide essential livelihoods and community spaces for low-income Asian migrants. Asian massage workers have carried this knowledge across generations as a form of culture, care, survival, and embodied knowledge.

Despite these deep roots in holistic wellness and community care, Asian massage services have been widely stigmatized, criminalized, and restricted.





REGULATION OF MASSAGE PARLOURS IN MARKHAM

Based on past experiences, workers, operators, and owners of massage parlours have been issued various tickets and fines for bylaw violations related to operating body rub parlours, including breaches of zoning requirements and building permit regulations. In some cases, landlords have also received notices requiring them to stop permitting the use of their premises for these activities. Therefore, it is important to understand the bylaws.

Governments have promoted inaccurate and discriminatory perceptions of Asian massage parlours and workers, who are presented as public nuisances, dangerous, criminal, and linked to human trafficking. Asian massage workers are described as passive victims who have no autonomy and are incapable of consenting, so that they must be victims of trafficking. These narratives are used as excuses for governments to control Asian massage workers, shut down their workplaces, and deny their right to work. At the same time, some anti-trafficking organizations have worked to increase racial profiling, policing, and the shutting down of Asian massage parlours through lobbying policymakers and government bodies such as the municipal government and Ministry of Labour.

In particular, municipal governments have enacted restrictive laws and policies that prevent many low-income migrant Asian women from providing massage services across Ontario, including:

- Requiring credentials to work in this setting, knowing language barriers and high costs of tuition for accredited programs make it difficult to obtain formal training for specific credentials;
- Imposing restrictive licensing requirements on massage parlour workers and owners, including with respect to work permits and invasive medication examinations; and
- Passing restrictive zoning bylaws that severely limit where massage parlours can be established.

Because of these racist laws and policies, workers are often targeted by law enforcement; face constant surveillance and harassment; and risk heavy fines, having their workplace shut down, and losing their income. These laws and policies stigmatize workers, fuel hate, and endanger their safety and security.

Despite the challenges they face, Asian massage workers in Canada and the U.S. have been organizing to speak out against anti-Asian racism, demand respect for their agency and work, and call on governments to stop the harassment and forced closure of their businesses.

The document not only helps workers understand the laws but also provides knowledge about policies and licensing processes, helping them navigate the system and be better informed when they advocate for their rights.



PERSONAL SERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS

What is considered a “personal service establishment” in Markham?

- Any individual or business providing personal care, hair dressing, grooming, esthetic, beauty, or similar services, including:
 - Acupuncture
 - Aromatherapy
 - Back walking massage
 - Body contouring (e.g. cellulite reduction, cupping)
 - Head Spa Services (e.g. hot stone massage, lymphatic drainage)
 - Massages by Registered Massage Therapists
 - Reiki, Reflexology, Shiatsu
 - Therapeutic Touch

What is the difference between a personal service establishment and a body rub parlour?

What license should I apply for?

- Licensing for personal service establishments is distinct from body rub parlours. The definition of a personal service establishment captures a broader range of services than a body rub parlour.
- Despite having zoning requirements, they are much less restrictive than those for body rub parlours.
- Personal service establishments require different documents for obtaining business licenses, such as articles of incorporation/general partnership agreements, business name registrations, and proof of insurance.
- There are fewer regulations governing personal service establishments, along with lower annual fees. Only the owner is required to apply for and renew a business licence each year, while employees or attendants are not required to obtain or renew licences..
- Owning and operating personal service establishments can still require careful navigation and these businesses can still be at risk of surveillance and harassment from bylaw enforcement and police.





PERSONAL SERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS OWNERS: LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

As an Owner, do I require a license?

Yes, the City of Markham requires personal service establishment owners to obtain and renew their license each year.

What documents do I need to provide when applying for a license?

Required documents for a license application include:

1. **Proof of work status** (Passport, Birth Certificate, Resident Card, Work Visa, or SIN Card plus Ontario/Canadian Photo ID)
2. **Articles of Incorporation or General Partnership Agreement**
 - If your business is owned by two or more individuals in a general partnership, you can provide the general partnership agreement.
 - If your business is a corporation (a legally separate entity from its owners), you can provide a Provincial or Federal Certificate of Incorporation. Visit [here](#) to learn more about provincial incorporations. Visit [here](#) to learn more about federal incorporations.
3. **Business Name Registration**
 - **Business names must be registered if they are different from the owner's legal name. Registrations are valid for five years and then must be renewed.**
 - You can register your Business Name online at the [Ontario Business Registry](#).
 - Requirements:
 - Owner's name (or Corporation name for corporate-owned businesses)
 - Address
 - Credit card (Visa or Mastercard) or debit card (Visa or Mastercard)
 - A valid email address
 - Cost:
 - Name search: \$8-\$26, depending on the type of records included
 - Name registration and renewal: \$60

How do I apply for a license?

- To apply for a license, gather all required documents and submit a fully completed application using this [application form](#). For more information and guidance about the application process, please visit the [City of Markham's Business License website](#).
- After you have submitted your application, you will need to wait for it to be approved. After it has been approved, a licensing officer from the City will contact you to book an appointment. Walk-ins are not permitted and will be turned away.

4. Insurance Certificate

- This is a document to provide proof of insurance. \$2,000,000 general liability coverage is required.

5. Zoning Search

- This is a document from Markham's Zoning Department showing that the business use is permitted. You can learn more zoning searches and request one for your business [here](#).
- Cost: \$131

6. York Region Health Inspection Report

- This is a full inspection report by York Regional Health. You can email York Regional Health at Health.Inspectors@york.ca or call them at 1-800-361-5653 to book an inspection.

For more information on required documents and to see examples of documents, please visit the [City of Markham's Business License website](#).



Are there any licensing fees I need to pay or be aware of?

- The annual licensing fee is \$300.50, with a late charge of \$57.00.
- You may also be required to pay \$60 upon your Business Name Registration.
- Find more information about licensing fees [here](#).

Do I need to renew my license?

- Yes, owners are required to pay to renew their license every year. You can renew your license [online](#). For more information, please visit the [City of Markham's Business License website](#).

Can the City reject my license application or renewal?

- Yes, the City has the right to deny licenses or renewals. The City may refuse your license on the basis of "public interest," unpaid fines, complaints, and violating bylaws. There is an appeal process to challenge denials of licenses and renewals.
- For more information, please visit the [City of Markham's Business License website](#).

Are there zoning regulations I should be aware of?

Relating to building and upkeep:

- Parking: there must be one parking space for every 30 square metres.

Relating to operation of services:

- If a personal service establishment operates out of a residential home, no more than four clients can be present and occupy the establishment at any one time.

Relating to renovations:

- Building permits are required before starting **any** construction, demolition, or renovation project.
- If pursuing any demolitions and/or alterations (such as adding new partitions; performing mechanical work; making changes to fire protection systems; installing new plumbing; adding, removing or altering a structural wall or column; etc.) you will be required to obtain **a demolition and/or alteration building permit**.
- For more information on building permits, when they are required, and how to apply for one, please visit [Markham's Guide to Building Permits](#) and [Markham's Building Permit Process](#).
- For more information about zoning regulations, visit [Markham's Zoning By-Law](#).

Is the City allowed to perform inspections, and when can they perform inspections?

- Licensing officers and/or law enforcement are allowed to enter the business at any "reasonable time" in order to perform inspections. Bylaw enforcement officers often inspect massage parlours for potential violations, such as providing unauthorized body rub services, breaching zoning regulations, or conducting renovations without the required building permits. They may also research advisements online and conduct undercover inspections in plain clothes to gather evidence, such as by requesting services, which can be used to issue charges.

FOR EMPLOYEES

Only people who own or operate Personal Services Establishments are required to apply and renew the license. Employees and attendants are not required to obtain a license.



BODY RUB PARLOURS

Massage parlours that do not have a personal service licence but offer massage services may be classified as body rub parlours and charged under body rub and zoning bylaws. City bylaw enforcement often targets venues suspected of providing sexual services.

What is considered a “body rub” parlour in Markham?

- In Markham, “body rub” is defined as kneading, manipulating, rubbing, massaging, touching or stimulating a person’s body. This captures the services of many massage parlours.
- “Body rub” does not include medical or therapeutic treatments that are given by persons licensed or registered under provincial laws, such as Registered Massage Therapists (RMTs), whose workplaces are classified as personal service establishments.
- Services appealing to “erotic” or “sexual appetites” are **not** permitted in body rub parlours. These services are regulated by a separate licensing category called “adult entertainment parlours.” For more information on Markham’s “Adult Entertainment Parlour” regulations, see the bylaw [here](#).
- For more information on this definition, please visit [Markham’s Licensing and Regulation of Stationary Businesses bylaw](#).



FOR BODY RUB PARLOUR OWNERS

As a body rub parlour owner, do I require a license?

- **Yes**, the City of Markham requires body rub parlour owners, which can include massage parlour owners, to obtain and renew their license each year. Once obtained, they cannot transfer the license to someone else, and the license must be displayed in a visible place (e.g. where others can see it) in the parlour.
- For more information about licensing requirements, please visit [the Licensing and Regulation of Stationary Businesses bylaw](#) at Schedule 9.



BODY RUB PARLOURS

OWNERS: LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

To apply for a license, gather all required documents and submit a fully completed application using this [application form](#). For more information and guidance about the application process, please visit the [City of Markham's Business license website](#).

After you have submitted your application, you will need to wait for it to be approved. After it has been approved, a licensing officer from the City will contact you to book an appointment.

Walk-ins are not permitted and will be turned away.

What documents do I need to provide when applying for a license?

Required documents for a license application include:

1. **Two (2) passport size photos**
2. **Proof of work permit or citizenship**
3. **Canadian Police Clearance letter dated within 30 days of application**
4. **Floor plan and building code drawings**

For more information about required documents for licensing applications, please click [here](#).



LICENSING FEES

Massage parlour owners should be aware of the following annual fees

Role	Role Description	Fee Amount
Parlour Owners	Individuals who own body rub parlours	\$14,110 Late charge: \$1,061.50
Operators	Individuals who operate, manage, supervise, run, or direct body rub parlours	\$1,034 Late charge: \$57
Attendants	Individuals who provide body-rubs at body rub parlours	\$1,034 Late charge: \$57

Find more information about fees [here](#).



Do I need to renew my license?

Yes, owners are required to pay to renew their license every year. You can renew your license [online](#). For more information, please visit the [City of Markham's Business license website](#).

Can the City reject my license application or renewal?

Yes, the City has the right to deny licenses or renewals. The City may refuse your license on the basis of “public interest”, unpaid fines, complaints, and violating bylaws. There is an appeal process to challenge denials of licenses and renewals.

Are there zoning laws that limit the location of a massage or body rub parlour?

Yes, Markham's zoning laws limit where a body-rub parlour can operate. You are not allowed to own or operate a body-rub parlour:

- Within 500 meters of **any residential zone** that exists when the application is submitted
- Within 500 meters of **any school, church, or child day care centre** that exists when the application is submitted
- Within 1 kilometre of **any other body-rub parlour** (licensed or unlicensed) that exists when the application is submitted

For more information about zoning requirements, please visit [Markham's Zoning bylaw](#).

Is the City allowed to perform inspections, and when can they perform inspections?

Licensing officers and/or law enforcement are allowed to enter the parlour during business hours in order to perform inspections.

Licensing Officers may request to see written contracts between you and every operator and attendant that has been employed within the last six months, as well as licenses of the attendants.

ADDITIONAL RESTRICTIONS & REQUIREMENTS

Relating to operation of services:

- Business hours are restricted to 9 AM to 9 PM
- Entrances to a body rub parlour must remain unlocked during opening hours
- When massages occur in the parlour, an owner or operator who does not provide massage services must be present
- Parlours are not allowed to circulate, post, or distribute posters, flyers, or printed signs outside of the parlour. However, parlours are permitted to advertise in newspapers and the Yellow Pages.
- Alcohol or drugs are not allowed on the premises. This does not apply to prescription drugs
- No intoxicated persons are allowed in the parlour
- No owner or operator can use any camera in the parlour, except in the entrance lobby for security purposes

Relating to the building and upkeep:

- Locking devices or other entry obstructions are not allowed on doors to any massage or body rub room
- Locking devices are allowed for one room that acts as an office and one room that acts as a storage room
- The parlour and all equipment must be regularly washed, including washrooms and showers
- Every massage or body rub room must have an unobstructed window and adequate lighting for visibility

For a complete list of all requirements and restrictions, please visit [Markham's Licensing and Regulation of Stationary Businesses bylaw](#).



BODY RUB PARLOURS

EMPLOYEES: LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

Types of employees at body rub parlours:

Operators: Individuals who operate, manage, supervise, run or direct operations at body rub parlours.

Attendants: Individuals who provide body rubs (kneading, manipulating, rubbing, massaging, touching or stimulating a person’s body) at body rub parlours.

As an employee, do I require a license?

Yes, the City of Markham requires attendants and operators to apply for and have a license.

What documents do I need to provide when applying for a license?

Required documents for both attendants and operators include:

1. **Two (2) passport size photos**
2. **Medical certificate within 30 days of application**
 - A certificate from qualified doctor indicating that the applicant is free from communicable or transmissible diseases
3. **Personal identification such as a driver’s license or passport**
4. **Proof of work status** (e.g. passport, birth certificate, resident card, or work visa)
5. **Vulnerable sector screening from police, dated within 30 days of application**
6. **Letter of employment from parlour owner** (signed and dated)
7. **Provincial drivers abstract**
 - A driver’s abstract is a government issued driver record. For more information on a driver’s abstract and how to order one, please visit [here](#).

Do I need to renew my license?

Yes, employees are required to pay to renew their license every year. You can renew your license online. For more information, please visit the [City of Markham’s Business license website](#).

How do I apply for a license?

To apply for a license, gather all required documents and submit a fully completed application using the [application form](#). For more information and the guidance about the application process, please visit the [City of Markham’s Business license website](#).

EMPLOYEE LICENSING FEES

Employees should be aware of the following annual fees

Role	Role Description	Fee Amount
Operators	Individuals who operate, manage, supervise, run, or direct body rub parlours	\$1,034 Late charge: \$57
Attendants	Individuals who provide body-rubs at body rub parlours	\$1,034 Late charge: \$57

Find more information about fees [here](#).

Are there any restrictions or limitations on what I can wear at work?

Attendants are required to wear clothes that “fully” and opaquely cover the pubic and genital area and breasts.

Attendants are not allowed to provide or offer services to clients unless their pubic and genital area, buttocks, and breasts are completely and opaquely covered.



CALL FOR ACTION

Listen to the voices of Asian massage workers: Respect their experiences, stories, and expertise. Share their voices and show your solidarity — for example, by signing petitions and amplifying their messages.

Join the movement to support Asian massage workers: Speak out against the criminalization, anti-Asian racism, and discrimination targeting massage parlours. Call on governments to end racial profiling, discriminatory and arbitrary regulation, and the forced closure of these businesses.

Support local Asian massage workers: Book a massage – honour a healing tradition, support the workers, and invest in community well-being.

Join us in recognizing massage as an important part of Asian heritage and in standing against the discrimination and stigma faced by Asian massage workers. Let us celebrate with pride, dignity, and solidarity.

March 2026



“What we are witnessing is not only an enforcement problem caused by vague policies, but also a deeper form of double discrimination: prejudice against Chinese immigrants and longstanding stigma against the massage industry. We urge the government not to punish the most vulnerable workers because of unclear regulations, and not to use heavy-handed enforcement to cover up policy failures. We ask the media and the public to hear our voices, understand our role, and recognize that we are lawful taxpayers, not criminals.” (Rita)

“Massage work is demanding physical labour. Our arms ache, our shoulders and necks stiffen, and many nights we wake up from pain. But we keep pushing through without complaint. We pay taxes and file taxes like every other responsible member of society. We can endure physical hardship. What is becoming unbearable is the endless psychological pressure. We chose Canada because we love this country. Our English may be limited, but we have dignity, we have value, and we contribute to this country just like anyone else.” (Rainbow)





WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

Department of Justice Canada

Ministère de la Justice Canada



Contact

[HIV Legal Network](#)

[Butterfly \(Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network\)](#)

