

Tuesday February 23, 2021

Dear Chair Miller and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

I write to you today as a sex worker who has traveled to Rhode Island many times since 2005 for the purpose of engaging intentionally in the commercial sex trade, which is my chosen career path. I am also the former Board President for the Sex Workers Outreach Project USA, and currently serve as national coordinator for the #OldProProject, a grassroots sex worker collaborative dedicated to sharing our history through storytelling and art.

I write to express my enthusiastic support for three House Bills before you, which are H5250, H5467, and S0249, all of which will improve the safety and welfare of people in the sex trade.

Some people engage in the sex trade because they choose to. Others engage because they must and have no other reasonable option. Some people are coerced or forced. Regardless of a person's circumstances, all three of these bills will better enable people in the sex trade to access justice, protect themselves from danger, and exit the sex trade if they wish.

H5467 is priority legislation that would greatly enhance the safety of people in the sex trade. I myself have been targeted by predators who target sex workers because we are unlikely to risk arrest by calling 911. Removing criminal penalty for people in the sex trade who reach out to report a crime would take away the #1 tool predators use to target and harm. PLEASE pass this bill.

S0249 is an essential bill for addressing police misconduct and the abuse that people can endure while compromised in detainment. I am reminded of the case of officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who repeatedly coerced sex from Black women with drug and prostitution records, some of whom were detained in his custody and even shackled. Daniel Holtzclaw was found guilty of his misdeeds, and I encourage Rhode Island to establish clear legislation that would similarly hold abusers in law enforcement accountable for their on duty misdeeds.

H5250 is necessary because our societal understanding of the sex trade is shaped more by fear than fact. Responsible legislation can only be undertaken when we understand the topic at hand. A study commission will enable thorough examine what policies will best serve people in the sex trade and their respective communities.

Thank you very much for your consideration of my message, and for your service to Rhode Island.

Sincerely,
Savannah Sly

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