

Steven Sepe

From: Melissa Sontag Broudo <mbroudo@soarinstitute.org>
Sent: Wednesday, February 24, 2021 9:04 PM
To: House Health and Human Services Committee
Cc: Randy Hencken; Chris Reilly
Subject: Written testimony in support of H5250
Attachments: SOAR Institute support letter H5250.pdf

Hello Committee members,

I am submitting testimony in strong support of H5250, creating a special legislative study committee. My name is Melissa Broudo and my full contact info is below!

I also requested to testify telephonically as well - hopefully that request was received!

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

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SOAR INSTITUTE

Memo of Support for House Resolution 5250

The Sharmus Outlaw Advocacy and Rights (SOAR) Institute strongly supports House Resolution 5250, which would create a special legislative commission to ensure racial equity and the optimization of health and safety laws impacting marginalized individuals. I am the Co Director of the SOAR Institute, and a longtime advocate and attorney for people in the sex trade.

Having nearly 20 years of experience in advocacy for sex workers and survivors of trafficking, I can say with certainty that we are not supporting the health and safety of those who are the most marginalized with our current legal landscape throughout the country. Rhode Island can be a true leader in ensuring the true realization of human rights for all, and in fighting exploitation and violence against people in the sex trade. In representing survivors of trafficking in New York, I have seen the ways that violence, arrest, stigma, racism, and misogyny compound their experiences and prevent the realization of human rights. We must do more to protect those who are the most vulnerable to abuse at the hands of the state and predators.

And while I am a New Yorker, my activism and research in this area began in Providence, while an undergraduate at Brown University; in fact, I wrote my thesis in 2001 on the negative impact of criminalization on the health of female sex workers. I chose to go to law school and also obtain my Masters in Public Health (joint degree from Georgetown Law and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health) specifically to gain expertise in this field so that one day I could support people in the sex trade in attaining rights and safety.

There has been significant research on the safety and health impact of laws governing commercial sex, specifically related to violence, stigma, exploitation, and sexual health. We all want to combat human trafficking, a severe human rights violation, and must figure out the best way to diminish this incidence of abuse. Research continues to point to a correlation between repressive policing policies, diminished health outcomes and coercive work environments. A meta-analysis conducted by professors at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and other institutions reviewing over 130 studies conducted over nearly 30 years made the following critical findings: repressive policing practices of sex workers were associated with increased risks of sexual/physical sexual violence from clients or other partners and led to increased risk of infection with HIV/STIs.¹

A study conducted by researchers at Baylor University and the University of California Los Angeles found that during 2003 through 2009, while indoor prostitution was decriminalized in Rhode Island, the number of rapes diminished by 31 percent and the statewide incidence of

¹ Lucy Platt, Pippa Grenfell, Rebecca Meiksin, Jocelyn Elmes, Susan G. Sherman, Teela Sanders, Peninah Mwangi & Anna-Louise Crago, *Associations Between sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies* 45, 46 (PLOS Med. ed., Dec. 11, 2018).

gonorrhoea among women diminished by 39 percent.² There has also been a documented increase in exploitation and violence against people in the sex industry in Rhode Island since the passage of federal legislation FOSTA in April of 2018, which has limited the availability to online websites for workers.³

Overall, the tremendous wealth of data demonstrate how the inability to assert one's rights and obtain support augments the likelihood and severity of exploitation and harms health and safety. Further analysis needs to be undertaken in Rhode Island to assess laws' impact on the most marginalized communities. We all want full realization of rights for all persons, especially the right to freedom from violence and exploitation.

I urge you to support this crucial legislation which would lead to best practices and implementation thereof in Rhode Island. Thank you for your time and consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,



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² CUNNINGHAM, SCOTT & SHAH, MANISHA, DECRIMINALIZING INDOOR PROSTITUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH (July 17, 2014). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2467633> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2467633>

³ COYOTE RI, SESTA/FOSTA (July 28, 2018), AVAILABLE AT: <https://coyoteri.org/wp/sesta-fosta-death-aids2018/>