

February 22, 2021

RE: Memo of Support for House Resolution 5250

I strongly support 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 a Professor of Public Policy at UCLA and have done a lot of research on the optimal regulation of sex markets both in the United States and globally. In fact, I am the author of one of the most well-known studies on the impact of the Rhode Island decriminalization (see “Decriminalizing Indoor Prostitution: Implications for Sexual Violence and Public Health” published in *The Review of Economic Studies* and can be found here: <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/wupru5ham2j00f2r8vrsnvjqbebrgbp>)

In this study, we find that during 2003 through 2009, while indoor prostitution was decriminalized in Rhode Island, the number of reported rape offenses diminished by 30 percent and the statewide incidence of gonorrhea among women diminished by 39 percent. Unfortunately, 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.

Overall 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 (see 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).

These studies and my own research 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. Please feel free to get in touch if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Manisha Shah".

Manisha Shah
Professor, UCLA
Director, Global Lab for Research in Action