

February 25, 2021

Support H5250

To the members of the House Health & Human Services Committee:

We are writing in support of H5250 to create a legislative commission to make a study. We understand the proposed study would look at how laws affect people in the sex industry and to provide recommendations on the health and safety impact of revising such laws, on ways to reduce violence, trafficking and exploitation, to ensure accountability for those communities targeted by the police and more.

We see a tremendous benefit in establishing such a commission in Rhode Island. Our organization, the US PROStitutes Collective (US PROS), was part of a City Task Force in San Francisco that had a similar remit to your proposed commission. It turned out to be an incredible and useful community consultation bringing together different sectors to study and debate issues relating to sex work, and hear from sex workers themselves. This was in 1996 and the two-year long Task Force presented comprehensive recommendations to the city of San Francisco. The body of work produced has had a lasting impact and brought about significant gains particularly in relation to health and safety of sex workers.

One of the biggest grievances put forward by sex workers during the Task Force was the fear of arrest and prosecution when reporting violence to the police. Consequently most did not. It became a demand of our movement and sex workers organizations in San Francisco pressed for the City to take it up. US PROS was part of an effort that led to winning two policies called "Safety for Sex Workers" policies from the police and district attorney's office. Both offices have agreed not to arrest and prosecute sex workers reporting violence.

Following the San Francisco policies, a bill was introduced into the California legislature called "Improving Sex Workers Health and Safety". In addition to prohibiting the arrest and prosecution of individuals engaged in sex work when they come forward as a victim of or a witness to violent crime, the bill also proposed that the possession of condoms not be used as cause to arrest someone for sex work. The bill passed through the Senate and Assembly and was signed into law last year. Both the San Francisco policies and the law are major breakthroughs and we attribute them to the work of the Task Force for putting the issue on the public agenda.

We note mention in H5450 of a documented increase in exploitation and violence against people in the sex industry in Rhode Island since the passage of federal legislation FOSTA/SESTA. We support the study of the impact of this law and other laws, looking at how they undermine sex workers safety and health, as well as how criminalization of sex work disproportionately targets communities of color. Increasingly cities around the country, are making proposals to repeal laws because of racist enforcement particularly against Black women, immigrant, trans and other women of

color. New York recently removed the loitering law, 91% of those arrested under the law were Black and Latinx people. The San Francisco Task Force looked at the high cost of enforcing prostitution laws and recommended that money should be better spent on resources and services to benefit the community ie. decriminalizing of sex work.

This commission can be an opportunity to address health and safety issues that affect some of the most vulnerable among us. Poverty has massively increased and the numbers of women going into prostitution is also rising. 73% of the poor in the US are women and children. Most sex workers are mothers and many women work in prostitution to make ends meet and feed and clothe children. Black, Latinx and Native American children are most likely to live in poverty. Transgender and young people are also driven into prostitution due to poverty and discrimination.

The commission wouldn't have to start from scratch. There has been significant [research](#) conducted by COYOTE RI on the safety and health impact of laws governing commercial sex, specifically related to violence, exploitation, stigma, and sexual health. In fact, some of this research was recently published in the ACLU's recent [research policy brief](#).

The health and safety of people involved in the sex industry should be a priority for legislators. Everyone should have the right to report violence, abuse, and exploitation without fear of arrest or retaliation. Policing sex workers shouldn't be a priority for law enforcement.

US PROS is one of the longest standing sex worker organizations in the US. We are a multiracial network of sex workers and ex-sex workers, representing women from both the street and indoors. We urge you to support H5250.

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