



## Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center

### Memo of Support for House Resolution 5250

The Sex Workers Project (SWP) of the Urban Justice Center (UJC) 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 Executive Director of the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center, a national organization advocating and educating for the human rights of sex workers and providing direct legal services to people working in the sex trades as well as survivors of human trafficking. I am also a sex worker of 20 years in both the legalized and criminalized sectors of the sex trades, and a human rights attorney of 15 years.

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.

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 gonorrhea among women diminished by 39 percent. 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.

Our experiences at SWP as a provider of direct legal and social services for sex workers and survivors of human trafficking for 20 years inform us time and time again that state violence, including police raids and arrests, harm both sex workers and people experiencing human trafficking. Arrest alone further traumatizes already traumatized individuals, let alone any further involvement in the criminal punishment system. Neither adult consensual sex workers nor people experiencing human trafficking benefit from arrest or prosecution. Only consensual, rights-based, harm reductive, trauma-informed services can help alleviate trauma. Court mandated services are ineffectual and coercive, keeping individuals tethered to the state systems rather than liberating or

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empowering their lives. The best way we have learned over 20 years to identify people who are vulnerable to human trafficking and other forms of labor exploitation such as wage theft, sexual assault and sexual harassment is to build long term trusted relationships with communities, individuals and community based organizations. We need human rights not rescue.

Overall, these studies, my personal lived experiences, the lived experiences of thousands of other sex workers and our trusted, trauma-informed expertise at SWP all 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 human 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,

DocuSigned by:

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