

Testimony of:

Donna M. Hughes

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Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, Emerita
University of Rhode Island

Read by:

Elisabeth Townsend,
Independent Advocate & Former Together With Love

Chair McEntee and Members of the Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Elisabeth Townsend, and I am here today to read on behalf of Dr. Donna M. Hughes, Professor Emerita from the University of Rhode Island. I will be reading her testimony in the first person.

I urge you to support House Bill 7201, and strongly oppose House Bill 8057.

As a professor at the University of Rhode Island, I have done extensive research on the impact of decriminalized prostitution, particularly in Rhode Island. I have published numerous reports, peer-reviewed papers, and opinion editorials on the harm and exploitation of prostitution.

In the past, I have testified before the Rhode Island Senate and House on the harm of prostitution and how removing criminal penalties, especially from sex buyers, allows the expansion of the sex industry and causes an increase in sex trafficking. These serious crimes are perpetrated by individual criminals and organized crime groups.

Before 2009, Rhode Island had decriminalized prostitution. The former mayor of Providence and Rhode Island Representative to the U.S. House of Representatives, David Cicilline, recommended the end of decriminalized prostitution. He said the lack of prostitution law created a criminal environment in Rhode Island that was a "true wild west" ("Time to End Legalized Prostitution in R.I." *Providence Journal*, May 19, 2009, at Commentary p. 6).

The people involved in selling sex are often victims of childhood sexual abuse and other adverse childhood experiences. They frequently suffer from substance abuse and addiction. They are usually controlled by pimps or others who facilitate and profit from their exploitation. The lawmakers of Rhode Island should be working to provide services and legal relief to these women, children, and sometimes men and boys who are exploited.

However, the men who buy sex should *never* have penalties removed from their harmful behavior. It is their demand for commercial sex that drives prostitution and sex trafficking.

Therefore, I support holding sex buyers criminally accountable. I support enhanced penalties for sex buyers. Enhanced penalties result in reduced recidivism among sex buyers. This will reduce harmful criminal activity and decrease the harm done to a vulnerable population in Rhode Island.

I commend you for seeking legal solutions to the problem of commercial sexual exploitation, but decriminalization is the wrong model. Please support H. 7201, and oppose H. 8057, to ensure meaningful protections for survivors.

Respectfully,

Donna M. Hughes