

Roberta DiMezza

From: NESW Info Share <info@neswinfo.org>
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To: House Judiciary Committee
Subject: Written Testimony in Support of H8057 & Opposition to H7201
Attachments: trisha_h7201_opposition.pdf; h8057_h7201.pdf; support_h8057.pdf; trisha_h8057_support.pdf; eqny_support_h8057.pdf; eqny_opposition_h7201.pdf

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Hello Roberta,

Please find attached letters of support of H8057 & in opposition to H7201 from our members. We offer the service of sending in written testimonies for those who may be unable/uncomfortable to send them in directly.

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Spoken Testimony in Support of H8057

Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Trisha Newalu and I am here to testify in support of House Bill 8057.

H8057 represents a meaningful shift in how Rhode Island approaches commercial sexual activity and human trafficking. According to public summaries of the bill, it does two important things: (1) it reframes consensual adult commercial sex as a public-health and economic issue rather than a purely criminal one, and (2) it strengthens the state's ability to prosecute actual exploitation by explicitly classifying human trafficking as a form of racketeering.

Those two components work together, and that is why this bill matters.

First, H8057 reduces unnecessary criminalization of consensual adults. For decades, people engaged in consensual commercial sex have been swept into the criminal-legal system, even when no coercion or exploitation was present. Public-health organizations, legal scholars, and service providers have repeatedly noted that criminalization makes it harder for people to access medical care, housing, and social services. It also discourages them from reporting violence or exploitation when it occurs.

By shifting low-level offenses toward civil penalties and service-based responses, H8057 allows adults to seek help without fear of arrest. This is a practical, evidence-informed approach that aligns with what many states and cities have learned: reducing criminal penalties for consensual conduct improves safety and increases cooperation with law enforcement.

Second, the bill strengthens Rhode Island's ability to go after traffickers. Public summaries note that H8057 adds human trafficking to the list of offenses that can be prosecuted under the state's racketeering laws. That is a significant change. Trafficking networks often operate like organized crime—using coercion, fraud, and financial structures that are difficult to dismantle through traditional charges alone. By allowing prosecutors to use racketeering tools, the state can pursue higher-level offenders, seize assets, and disrupt the financial incentives that drive exploitation.

This is a targeted, strategic approach: reduce penalties for consensual adults while increasing the tools available to pursue those who exploit others.

Third, H8057 includes provisions that make it easier for people with past low-level offenses to

rebuild their lives. Public summaries indicate that the bill expands opportunities for expungement of certain prostitution-related records. This is critical. A criminal record—especially for offenses tied to survival or coercion—can block access to employment, housing, and education. Removing those barriers helps people exit exploitation and regain stability.

Finally, H8057 aligns Rhode Island with a growing body of research and policy recommendations that emphasize harm reduction, survivor-centered services, and precise enforcement. It does not ignore exploitation; it focuses enforcement where it belongs—on traffickers and coercive actors—while reducing the collateral harm caused by broad criminalization.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to support H8057. It is a balanced, evidence-informed bill that improves public safety, strengthens anti-trafficking efforts, and provides a more humane and effective framework for addressing commercial sexual activity in our state.

Thank you for your time

Testimony in Opposition to H7201

Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee

Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Trisha Newalu and I am here to speak in opposition to House Bill 7201, which expands penalties for purchasing sexual services and mandates participation in a new “commercial sex buyer’s accountability program.”

Everyone in this room shares the goal of reducing exploitation and preventing human trafficking. The concern with H7201 is not the intent—it is that the bill expands criminalization without evidence that it reduces harm.

1. The bill increases penalties without demonstrating effectiveness.

H7201 raises fines, adds mandatory fees, and expands criminal liability for solicitation, including from a motor vehicle. Research from multiple jurisdictions shows that increasing penalties for consensual adult commercial sex does not reduce trafficking. Instead, it increases arrests of adults engaged in consensual activity and diverts law-enforcement resources away from identifying actual trafficking victims, who require specialized intervention.

2. The mandatory “accountability program” is undefined and regressive.

The bill requires anyone convicted to enroll in a new program and pay a mandatory \$1,000 fee. The program’s curriculum, evidence base, and oversight are not described. Without clear standards, it risks becoming a punitive seminar rather than a meaningful intervention. The fee is also regressive and adds to court-debt burdens that already destabilize low-income residents.

3. The bill risks widening racial and economic disparities.

Solicitation laws are historically enforced unevenly, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. H7201’s language—criminalizing attempts to “engage persons in another vehicle or pedestrians in conversation” for indecent purposes—gives broad discretion to officers. Broad discretion often leads to inconsistent enforcement and increases the likelihood of pretextual stops.

4. The bill conflates consensual adult activity with trafficking.

H7201 frames itself as an anti-trafficking measure, but the text does not distinguish between consensual adult commercial sex and coercive or exploitative situations. This conflation misdirects resources and discourages victims from seeking help for fear of arrest, fines, or mandated programs.

5. More effective alternatives exist.

If the goal is to reduce exploitation, Rhode Island could instead invest in:

- survivor-led services and housing supports
- specialized investigative units trained to identify coercion
- public-health and social-service interventions
- expanded expungement pathways for prostitution-related records

These approaches address root causes rather than expanding penalties that have not been shown to reduce harm.

Conclusion

For these reasons—lack of evidence, regressive financial penalties, risk of discriminatory enforcement, and the availability of more effective alternatives—I respectfully urge the committee to reject H7201 and pursue evidence-based, survivor-centered strategies that genuinely reduce exploitation and improve public safety.

Thank you for your time.

Testimony regarding H8057 and H7201

Rhode Island Judiciary Committee

April 9, 2026

There are several legal and policy concerns with this kind of legislation. Some raise constitutional based issues, while others relate to real life tests and enforcement.

In short, the proposed legislation's biggest issues are:

- Vagueness and overbreadth
- Free speech infringement
- Discretion-heavy enforcement
- Excessive or inflexible penalties

1. Vagueness and Overbreadth

The phrase "*to engage or attempt to engage...in conversation*" for purposes of prostitution or "other indecent act" is overly broad.

- It risks criminalizing ordinary, innocent behavior (e.g., someone talking to a stranger from a car).
- Courts often strike down laws that are too vague under the Due Process Clause, because people must clearly understand what conduct is illegal
- "Indecent act" is especially undefined and could lead to arbitrary enforcement.

2. First Amendment Concerns

Talking or attempting to talk to someone is generally protected speech.

- Criminalizing "attempts to engage in conversation" could violate the First Amendment and further demands the law be narrowly tailored
- Even if the intent is illegal, the statute must clearly distinguish between protected speech and criminal conduct.
- Because the law is broad, people may avoid lawful interactions out of fear and this chilling effect could raise freedom of speech concerns

3. Proof of Intent Issues

The law hinges heavily on *intent* (e.g., "for the purposes of prostitution").

- Intent is difficult to prove and may rely on subjective judgment.
- This increases the risk of wrongful arrests.

4. Mandatory Minimums and Non-Suspendable Fines

The statute imposes fixed fines and prohibits suspension.

- Can disproportionately impact low-income individuals, potentially leading to cycles of debt or incarceration.

5. Mandatory “John School” Program Fees

The required \$1,000 fee for the “commercial sex buyer’s accountability program” raises issues:

- Functions like an additional penalty rather than purely educational.
- May be challenged as excessive or punitive, especially when combined with other fines.
- Again, disproportionately affects low-income individuals

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Sex work is not abhorrent, it is the consequence of being arrested for sex work that makes sex work demeaning. In our capitalist society everyone sells, their bodies, their minds, their skills with no consequences, except the individual that decides that sex work is their profession. The professional athlete is selling their body, at a much higher risk reward ratio. I believe sex work should be decriminalized, as a profession here in Rhode Island and America.

As with any profession, entering in to sex work is a choice. Becoming a sex worker is exercising our free choice, which is guaranteed to us by the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. As long as all parties are consenting adults.

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For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to support H8057. It is a balanced, evidence-informed bill that improves public safety, strengthens anti-trafficking efforts, and provides a more humane and effective framework for addressing commercial sexual activity in our state.

Thank you for your time



April 9, 2026

RE: Support for H8057 - “An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses - Commercial Sexual Activity”

To the House Committee on the Judiciary,

Equality New York would like to express our strong support of H8057, which would decriminalize commercial sexual activity. Equality New York (EQNY) is a grassroots advocacy organization that advances the lives of all LGBTQI+ New Yorkers and their families. We work towards advancing equality and justice for all New Yorkers and their families, by using an ecological lens for implementing all policies, programs and projects.

Extensive research and evidence show that repealing laws that criminalize consensual adult sex work will help end human trafficking, improve public health, and promote community safety. In 2023, the “Special Legislative Study Commission Ensuring Racial Equity and Optimizing Health and Safety Laws Affecting Marginalized Individuals” specifically recommended that Rhode Island legislators ensure that “private, consensual sexual activity remains out of the reach of criminal laws”. The Commission found that the criminalization of sex work “fuels stigma and discrimination against sex workers, which impedes their access to basic necessities, including healthcare, housing, and other social services.” Decriminalizing sex work allows workers more access to critical services without the harms of criminalization.

This bill repeals all commercial sexual activity laws while leaving laws against human trafficking on the books. This will bolster anti-trafficking efforts around the state. Prostitution laws direct law enforcement resources towards consenting adults, limiting their ability to focus on human trafficking. Additionally, when commercial sexual activity is illegal, it continues to happen - but its criminalization leads to unsafe conditions; it limits sex workers’ ability to create safety networks, work together, screen clients, and seek necessary services.

Between 1980 and 2009, indoor prostitution was legal in Rhode Island. During that time period, there was a significant decline in sexually transmitted diseases and sexual assaults within the state. Rhode Island legislators should return to policies that had demonstrable positive effects on public health and safety in the state.

Leading organizations, including the World Health Organization, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, have endorsed decriminalization as the best way to combat trafficking, reduce harm, improve health outcomes, and uphold human rights. Criminalizing sex work has

consistently failed to protect people, instead it only increases stigma, pushes workers into unsafe conditions, and limits their ability to report violence or seek help. Decriminalization, by contrast, allows sex workers to access basic protections, healthcare, and legal rights, creating safer communities for everyone.

This legislature has already passed several of the policies recommended by the study commission, and should continue to heed the advice of experts and community members. It is critical that you pass H8057 to decriminalize commercial sexual activity in Rhode Island. This policy change will address systemic inequality and create more equitable and safe communities for all.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this important matter.

Equality New York



April 9, 2026

RE: Opposition for H7201 - “An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses - Commercial Sexual Activity”

To the House Committee on the Judiciary,

Equality New York would like to express our strong opposition to H7201, which would establish a commercial sex buyer’s accountability program and create additional fees for persons convicted of procurement of sexual conduct for a fee and soliciting from motor vehicles for indecent purposes. Equality New York (EQNY) is a grassroots advocacy organization that advances the lives of all LGBTQI+ New Yorkers and their families. We work towards advancing equality and justice for all New Yorkers and their families, by using an ecological lens for implementing all policies, programs and projects.

This bill would create new penalties for individuals convicted of procuring or soliciting for commercial sexual activity, by requiring those persons to attend an accountability program (colloquially referred to as “john school”) and pay a \$1000 fee, additional to existing fees. Increasing criminal penalties for buyers in consensual adult commercial sex transactions causes increased danger for sex workers without meaningfully addressing trafficking concerns. The conflation of adult consensual sex work and human trafficking is harmful and misallocates law enforcement resources, while leading to increased criminalization of workers and other already marginalized communities.

There is no reliable data demonstrating a causal connection between “john school” programs and a decline in re-arrest rates among male purchasers of commercial sex or a reduction in the incidence of prostitution or human trafficking. In fact, quite the opposite: extensive research on existing “end demand” countries (where the client is criminalized) shows the following overwhelmingly negative health and safety outcomes for the most vulnerable workers. Below are key observations from leading expert Dr. Niina Vuolajärvi, Assistant Professor at the London School of Economics, who has conducted over 210 interviews conducted across Sweden, Norway, and Finland and done extensive literature review on the subject:

1. While street-based work declined in Sweden, where clients are criminalized, internet escort ads rose over 2000 percent between 2006 and 2014 [from 304 to 6,965 ads.] [This reflects the general trend of the industry in the last 20 years across countries]. In Ireland, the market reduction was temporary: Sex buyer law reduced the size of the sex market, however this decrease was temporary and within 18-24 months the market had returned to pre-sex buyer law levels.
2. Recent studies across Nordic countries found that in Sweden 10-15% of men have paid for sexual services, Finland 11-13%, Norway 13%, and Denmark 13%, so there is no radical

Dr. Niina Vuolajärvi, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science, Testimony submitted to Parliament, <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/60710/documents/6485>, referencing this study within her testimony: <https://www.scup.com/doi/10.18261/issn.2387-3299-2017-02-02>.

id., referencing Peter Backus & Thien Nguyen 2021.

difference between Sweden and Norway that have adopted full sex buyer criminalization to other Nordic countries.

3. Critically, violence against sex workers and unsafe working conditions have increased since passage of end demand laws. In Ireland, two years after the introduction of criminalizing the buying of sex, self-reported crime towards people who sell sex has almost doubled. In France, the introduction of the criminalization of sex buying has led to an increase in violence, deterioration of living conditions, loss of income, harder to negotiate condom use, deterioration of relations with police, and low awareness or suitability of the exit programs.

Scholars and researchers have also found that john schools reroute resources that could instead be used to address the factors that keep sex workers from leaving the sex trade if they choose to, and that accountability programs perpetuate the stigma and over-criminalization of sex work that create dangerous conditions and increased vulnerability to exploitation.

As cited above, increased criminalization of buyers including additional fees like those proposed here also reduce safety measures for sex workers. When clients have increased fear of police, they are reluctant to participate in screening measures that workers use for safety. The fee proposed in this bill is partially allocated to law enforcement entities who make arrests for procurement and soliciting, creating what is essentially a bounty system for commercial sexual activity arrests. This will ultimately lead to increased surveillance and policing of prostitution, increasing the risk of arrest and danger for sex workers themselves. Increased criminalization will not improve conditions or safety for sex workers, nor will it reduce trafficking. Increased arrests also will not stop the existence of sex work in Rhode Island – according to the Rhode Island Department of Public Safety UCR data portal, arrests for prostitution and procuring prostitution continue to be made year after year – so clearly criminalization has not stopped the existence of adult consensual sex work.

Additionally, the 2023 “Special Legislative Study Commission Ensuring Racial Equity and Optimizing Health and Safety Laws Affecting Marginalized Individuals” made several recommendations for legislation that would decrease trafficking and increase the safety and health of adult consensual sex workers; there was no recommendation made for the state to create a buyers’ accountability program. This legislature has already passed several of the policies recommended by the study commission and should continue to heed the advice of experts and community members, who instead advise that the best policy to confront these issues is the full decriminalization of adult consensual sex work.

For those reasons, Equality New York urges you to oppose the passage of H7201 and encourage the support of H8057, which would instead decriminalize adult consensual sex work. It is critical for the safety and well-being of all communities in Rhode Island to pursue the policy choices that are proven to aid in the investigation of human trafficking and improve the health and safety of adult consensual sex workers.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter.
Equality New York

Id., referencing Sverige Folkhalsomyndigheten 2019.

Id., referencing Ugly Mugs 2019.

Id., referencing Mediciens du Monde 2018.

Lovell, R. and Jordan A., “Do John Schools Really Reduce Recidivism?”, 2012.
<https://esplern.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/John-Schools-Lovell-Jordan-7-12.pdf>