

SOAR INSTITUTE

April 9, 2026

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

To the House Committee on the Judiciary,

I would like to express my 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 vehicle for indecent purposes. I am a licensed clinical social worker with over 20 years of experience providing therapy and support for people in the sex trade, as well as a policy advocate for sex workers and survivors of trafficking. Through my work, I have seen how stigma, violence, discrimination, and criminalization have negatively impacted the psychological and physical health of my patients. Programs such as these that seek to augment penalties lead to profoundly worse health outcomes for the most marginalized individuals.

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.]¹ [This reflects the general trend of the industry in the last 20 years across countries]. In Ireland, the market

¹ 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>.

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. (Source: Peter Backus & Thien Nguyen 2021)²

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 difference between Sweden and Norway that have adopted full sex buyer criminalization to other Nordic countries (Sverige Folkhälsomyndigheten 2019).³
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 (Source: Ugly Mugs 2019).⁴ 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 (Source: Mediciens du Monde 2018).⁵

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.⁶

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

² Id, referencing Peter Backus & Thien Nguyen 2021.

³ Id, referencing Sverige Folkhälsomyndigheten 2019.

⁴ Id, referencing Ugly Mugs 2019.

⁵ Id, referencing Mediciens du Monde 2018.

⁶ Lovell, R. and Jordan A., “Do John Schools Really Reduce Recidivism?”, 2012. <https://esplerp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/John-Schools.Lovell.Jordan.7.12.pdf>

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, I urge 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. I know from my longtime clinical practice the tremendous harms that heightened criminalization brings, as inevitably shame, stigma, and violence follow. Rather than shame and punish, we must support and uplift those who are the most marginalized to ensure bodily autonomy, safety, and human rights.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter. Please feel free to reach out to me for further questions or concerns on this complex matter.

Crystal DeBoise, LCSW
Co Director, SOAR Institute
cdeboise@soarinstitute.org