

Donna M. Hughes
Eleanor M. and Oscar M. Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies
Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, Emerita
University of Rhode Island

9 Apr 2026

Members of the Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee:

I am writing to strongly oppose H.B.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 now the 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).

Melanie Shapiro, Attorney and Adjunct Professor of Law at Roger William University School of Law, and I have documented the environment that was created by the lack of prostitution laws in Rhode Island. The title of this peer-reviewed paper is "Decriminalized Prostitution: Impunity for Violence and Exploitation." It was published in the *Wake Forest Law Review*. A copy of this paper follows this letter. I request that you read it.

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.

I commend you for seeking legal solutions to the problem of commercial sexual exploitation, but decriminalization is the wrong model.

Respectfully,

Donna M Hughes, Ph.D.
Professor & Eleanor M. and Oscar M. Carlson Endowed Chair, Emerita
Department of Gender and Women's Studies
University of Rhode Island