

# SOAR INSTITUTE

April 9, 2026

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

To the House Committee on the Judiciary,

The Sharmus Advocacy and Rights [SOAR] Institute is in strong support of H8057, which would decriminalize commercial sexual activity. We at SOAR are longtime advocates for sex workers and survivors of human trafficking with over two decades of experience providing legal and mental health support to survivors, nearly all of whom have been harmed by criminalization. Our organization also provides capacity building to grassroots organizations working with sex workers, so we have a birds-eye view of the many ways this legislation affects our communities. As a longtime attorney, activist, and Co Director of SOAR, I have seen how criminalization harms the most vulnerable people.

I am honored to be able to advocate for decriminalization in Rhode Island; my passion for sex worker advocacy began here while an undergraduate at Brown University in the late 1990s and my dedication to this fight has only strengthened since then. While representing sex workers and survivors in New York City for over a decade, I saw the tremendous harm caused by criminalization, stigmatization, and violence, all of which are deeply intertwined.

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.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to have a nuanced conversation about the sex trade, it is critical to disentangle consensual sex work from human trafficking. We must support all people in the sex trade – whether there by choice, circumstance, or coercion, and acknowledge the myriad and diverse experiences within the industry. This bill honors this by repealing all consensual commercial sexual activity laws while leaving laws against human trafficking on the books. This will further bolster anti-trafficking efforts around the state. Prostitution laws direct law enforcement resources towards consenting adults, limiting their ability to focus on human trafficking.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island House of Representatives, Final Report by the Special Legislative Study Commission, May 22, 2023, <https://decriminalizesex.work/wp-content/uploads/05-22-2023-Final-Report-Marginalized-Individuals-Commission.pdf>.

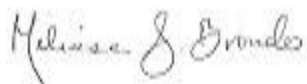
Additionally, when commercial sexual activity is illegal [such as in RI], it continues to happen - but its criminalization leads to unsafe conditions; it limits sex workers' ability to create safety networks, work together, screen clients, and seek necessary services.

Between 1980 and 2009, indoor prostitution was legal in Rhode Island. During that time period, there was a significant decline in sexually transmitted infections [40 percent decrease in female gonorrhea] and sexual assaults [30 percent decrease in reports of rape] within the state. Rhode Island legislators should return to policies that had demonstrable positive effects on public health and safety in the state.<sup>2</sup>

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. An extensive study commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Justice determined that since the enactment of the Prostitution Reform Act in 2003, sex workers reported a heightened ability to protect themselves, negotiate with clients for their safety, and overall felt more supported by the legal system.<sup>3</sup>

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 and enable law enforcement to focus on finding violent and exploitative perpetrators. Thank you for your time and consideration on this important matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information.

Best,



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<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, Scott & Shah, Manisha. Decriminalizing Indoor Prostitution: Implications for Sexual Violence and Public Health, *The Review of Economic Studies*, Volume 85, Issue 3, July 2018, Pages 1683–1715, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdx065>

<sup>3</sup> Abel, Gillian et al. The Impact of the Prostitution Reform Act on the Health and Safety Practices of Sex Workers, University of Otago, November 2007, [https://www.otago.ac.nz/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/248760/pdf-811-kb-018607.pdf](https://www.otago.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/248760/pdf-811-kb-018607.pdf)