

## **Rhode Island: A Safe Haven for Pimps and Human Traffickers?**

As you read this, members of the Rhode Island legislature are attempting to reconcile two “versions” of a bill supposedly intended to combat prostitution. In reality, the two bills couldn't be more different. While both purport to close the loophole regarding indoor prostitution, the House bill (H5044A), endorsed by the governor and the attorney general, empowers law enforcement to protect victims and punish perpetrators. In contrast, the Senate bill (S0596A) would provide pimps and human traffickers a safe haven and send a chilling message to the victims of commercial sexual exploitation, especially the youngest and most vulnerable, that their suffering is of no concern to the people of Rhode Island.

Currently, loopholes in Rhode Island law allow minors to work in strip clubs, which could facilitate entry into prostitution. Recently, a 16 year old girl from Boston was found bleeding and incoherent in an apartment in South Providence. An escaped convict forced her to strip at one of the state's many strip clubs. The federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) considers sex trafficking to be a commercial sex act in which force, fraud or coercion is present or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. However, in the absence of necessary state laws, the TVPA and other applicable federal laws such as the Mann Act become effectively unenforceable.

The House bill builds on existing law to bring Rhode Island into alignment with the laws of other states and the TVPA. The bill criminalizes both the purchase and sale of sex with civil and criminal penalties for both parties. In contrast, the Senate bill repeals all existing laws relating to prostitution and pimping. Both the purchase and sale of sex would be decriminalized and reduced to simple civil violations, and the Senate bill offers no protection to victims of human trafficking.

Under current state law, pimping is a felony and it would remain so under the House bill. This recognizes the physical violence and psychological trauma inherent in pimping. Under the Senate bill, existing pimping laws would be repealed and would no longer be considered a felony. It would make some pimping offenses misdemeanors, while others, such as “pandering,” or recruitment into prostitution, would be legalized. Most victims are “recruited” into prostitution between ages 11 and 14 according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

The House bill would enable law enforcement to obtain search warrants necessary to investigate known prostitution rings, many of which exploit minors. According to NCMEC, ineffective laws have resulted in the exclusion of Rhode Island from the FBI's “Innocence Lost” initiative that seeks to recover child victims of trafficking. Investigations into illegal activity among adults, as demonstrated through the “Innocence Lost” initiative, are the primary method of locating trafficked youth. Pimps and traffickers are savvy enough to keep the children they sell out of reach of law enforcement by hiding them behind prostituted adults who are assumed to be consenting.

We urge you to contact your state legislators in support of the House bill. This bill can serve as the first step in the creation of a comprehensive response to commercial sexual exploitation, including diversion programs and social services for survivors and programs to address demand such as the “John School,” created by Standing Against Global Exploitation (SAGE) in San Francisco, where men arrested for solicitation learn about the reality of prostitution from the perspective of survivors and the long term effects of prostitution on the community. This has been proven effective in sensitizing men to the psychological and physical trauma that the women and youth they exploit conceal under the surface.

Ultimately, we must give hope to the exploited that society has the means and the will to help them. As Sabrina (name changed), a survivor who escaped from prostitution with the help of the Barnaba

Institute, stated, “the girls that were on the street...that wasn’t the problem, that was just a symptom of the problem. The biggest problem was what we went through when we were kids, what we went through that drove us to think that we needed to be out there and what drove us to keep us out there.”

Signed by,

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