

Call Off Your Old  
Tired Ethics



Dear Senate Judiciary Committee,

We are writing to encourage you to vote yes on Senate Bill 2713.

S2713 will decriminalize sex workers, our clients, our non-violent support staff, and stop the practice of charging sex workers who share space or clients for safety with felony Promoting Prostitution.

Currently sex workers and sex trafficking survivors are unable to report violent crimes like sex trafficking to the police without fear of being arrested for prostitution. Sex traffickers and other perpetrators know we are afraid of the police and think they can victimize us with no consequences. Sex workers and sex trafficking survivors are marginalized and urgently need access to the equal protections of the justice system.

In a survey of 63 Rhode Island sex workers that COYOTE conducted in conjunction with Brown University with funding from the American Sociological Association, 79% of sex workers who had tried to report a crime to police reported that they were turned away, 21% reported that they were threatened with arrest, and 6% said they were actually arrested while trying to report a crime to police.

Under the current Promoting Prostitution code, it is a felony to rent to a prostitute. This means that sex workers who have been outted or arrested for prostitution are often unable to access housing on our own, leaving us vulnerable to sex traffickers and others who are able to exploit our need for housing for ourselves and our families.

Employers discriminate against people with prostitution convictions, which can leave some sex workers trapped in the underground economies to support ourselves and our families. When prostitution is a choice it should be respected. When someone does not want to do sex work anymore but is trapped in the industry because the state has placed a scarlet letter on their record, it can be traumatic. Sex workers and sex trafficking survivors also face discrimination in custody matters and accessing financial instruments because of the anti-prostitution laws.

Clients of sex workers are our first responders in cases of trafficking, where victims are often never alone with anyone except for clients. Currently clients intervene by providing money, the use of their phone, and referrals to older, more experienced sex workers. Sometimes clients and/or other sex workers attempt to "rescue" victims and this can be very dangerous, as we are not trained or resourced to do so. It is reprehensible that sex workers and our clients are placed

in these situations by anti-prostitution laws that deny us access to the equal protections of the justice system.

The Promoting Prostitution law criminalizes landlords of sex workers, resulting in discrimination in housing that creates vulnerability to exploitation. It criminalizes sex workers when we work together by sharing space, clients, or transportation, which we do for safety. If we hire a driver or security person, they can be charged with felony Promoting Prostitution. This criminalization of our landlords and our non-violent colleagues prevents us from reporting serious violent crimes, like sex trafficking.

When sex workers, our clients, and our non-violent colleagues are prevented from reporting violent crimes, violent criminals are able to keep perpetrating violence in our communities and public safety suffers greatly. In fact, when Rhode Island decriminalized prostitution from 2003 to 2009, sexual assault decreased by 30%, and gonorrhea decreased by 40%. In March 2022 RI DOH published an update on sexually transmitted infections. This report revealed that gonorrhea, syphilis, and chlamydia have all increased since RI criminalized prostitution in 2009.

In New Zealand, they have essentially eliminated sex trafficking by decriminalizing sex workers, our clients, and our non-violent colleagues. Under decriminalization, New Zealand sex workers are able to access the equal protections of labor laws, for example one sex worker was able to hold a brothel owner accountable for sexually harrassing her.

COYOTE RI is a group of current and former sex workers and sex trafficking survivors advocating for policy for increased safety in Rhode Island's sex industry. We urge you to vote yes and pass S2713

Sincerely,

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