

# SOAR INSTITUTE

February 15, 2024

## **IN SUPPORT OF H7165 “Relating to Criminal Offenses - Commercial Sexual Activity”**

To the House Judiciary Committee,

We at the SOAR Institute would like to express our strong support of H7165. As longtime attorneys, advocates, and service providers for survivors of human trafficking and sex workers, we know from experience how imperative it is for all victims and witnesses of crime to be able to report their experience to law enforcement and healthcare providers. People experiencing trafficking are at an increased risk of experiencing violence and further exploitation. Many of those being trafficked do not report violent crimes or seek medical attention for injuries and trauma resulting from that violence because they fear being prosecuted for prostitution. Attackers exploit this fear and commit heinous crimes with impunity, leaving exploited persons at risk of serious injury, even death. Infamous serial killers across the country have openly admitted to targeting those engaged in prostitution for this very reason, from Gary Ridgway to Sam Little to Rex Heuermann [Gilgo Beach Killer].

When trafficked people are arrested, they are subject to another layer of trauma. Involvement in the criminal legal system not only adds to trauma and stigma, which makes emotional recovery much more difficult, but it also creates additional practical barriers to survivors as they rebuild their lives. Criminal convictions impede survivors’ access to housing, education, and other critical social services. Thus, it is critical that trafficked people - and all people in the sex industry - are guaranteed immunity from prosecution for prostitution when they make the brave decision to report their victimization or that of others to law enforcement, or to seek medical care.

To make our communities safer, it is in the public interest to encourage victims and witnesses of crime to come forward and aid law enforcement. This bill would enable law enforcement to arrest and convict those committing criminal acts, and in so doing, protect Rhode Island’s most vulnerable. It also sends a clear message that trafficking survivors deserve the right to report crimes committed against them and seek justice if they so choose. Passing this legislation is a critical step in our effort to end human trafficking in Rhode Island and promote the health, wellbeing, and social support of all survivors.

The SOAR Institute strongly supports H7165 and urges the House Judiciary to do the same in order to ensure the safety and health of all of Rhode Island. We have had the honor to support passage of similar bills in numerous other states, including California, New Hampshire, Vermont, and hopefully New York this session. Thank you for your consideration on this matter.