

February 15, 2024  
Testimony of Allison Kolins, Esq.  
Consulting Attorney, Decriminalize Sex Work  
In Support of H7165 & H7452

I am here today to testify in support of two critical pieces of legislation that would support the health, safety, and rights of people in the sex industry. I have been a criminal defense and civil rights lawyer for over 25 years.

First, I wholeheartedly support H7165, which would grant immunity from prosecution for prostitution to victims and witnesses of crime. During my many years as a public defender, I saw how the majority of my clients – who were labelled criminals by the system – were also very often victims of violent crime, but were terrified of reporting crimes to the police because of deep mistrust and negative encounters with law enforcement. Sex workers, who are the most vulnerable to violent crimes, are often reluctant to report crimes or even seek medical services for fear of arrest, ridicule, or police violence. This bill would go a long way to ensuring that the most marginalized victims can come forward if they so choose.

Second, I also strongly support H7452, which would do two critical things for people in the sex trade and people profiled as being sex workers. It would a) remove additional civil fines for those arrested for prostitution and b) repeal loitering for prostitution. When I did public defense, the court fees that my clients faced perpetuated a never ending cycle of poverty, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. People engaging in the sex trade are often economically disadvantaged, and additional fees will only further harm and make it difficult for people to get back on their feet. In regards to loitering for prostitution, I am thankful it is so rarely utilized in Rhode Island – but if it remains on the books, it can be used by law enforcement to indiscriminately target the most marginalized communities if they so choose. In New York, we were able to repeal our loitering for the purpose of engaging in prostitution offense after a lawsuit alleging discriminatory practices by the NYPD and ensuing legislation. Doing so here would have no discernible negative impact because it is rarely utilized, but would serve as a protection to people of color, transgender individuals, and others who are traditionally targeted by such laws.

I thank you for your time and attention to these critical bills. Thank you.

Regards,

Allison Kolins, Esq.