

Elisabeth Townsend
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POSITION: Oppose RI HB 7452 (Corrections and Loitering Bill)

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Elisabeth Townsend, I am a resident of East Providence, RI and am a part of an organization called Together with Love. We are dedicated to working with the community to advocate and care for those impacted by Sexual Exploitation.

Based on my experience in the anti-trafficking field, I wanted to share my concerns regarding certain portions of HB 7452.

I am in support of the pieces of legislation that repeal those convicted of prostitution to pay extra court costs and I also agree that the crime of loitering for prostitution should be repealed, however, **only** as it pertains to those in prostitution and **not** buyers of sex.

While this bill would help put an end to the arrest of people in the sex trade, it would undoubtedly lead to an increase of sex buying in our state, causing greater harm and trauma to a population that is already vulnerable and marginalized.

In this bill, it states how other jurisdictions in parts of the country have repealed similar laws for prostitution. According to a news article from the Times of San Diego, the repeal of loitering laws in California from SB 357 led to “an explosion of street trafficking, the most dangerous type of prostitution” and that “demand is going through the roof,” as stated by Greg Burt of the California Family Council.

Stephany Powell, Director of Law Enforcement Training at the National Center for Sexual Exploitation had also stated “the numbers have doubled, not only in terms of the girls walking the streets for the purposes of prostitution, but also the sex buyers that were circling the blocks.” She goes on to say that “the people that the bill was trying to protect, it has not protected them. It’s made it worse.”

Repealing the crime for loitering of prostitution for buyers, is the equivalent of rolling out a “welcome mat” in Rhode Island, showcasing our state to the rest of our region and beyond as a hub for prostitution and with that, sex trafficking. It serves as yet another way to let buyers and traffickers continue to exploit and abuse women and men without fear of facing criminal charges or retribution.

While I agree that people in the sex trade should not face prosecution as a result of loitering, I urge you all to take a closer look at the stark realities of trafficking happening within our state

and compare it to the lack of supports realistically needed for safe exit opportunities, housing and comprehensive wrap-around services.

Ending arrests without services only gets us so far. Our focus should be on increasing safety and supportive measures for people exiting the sex trade, including community based programs like the correctional program for women offenders listed in the bill, instead of repealing laws that will further lead to violence and lack of bodily autonomy.

We do not want our state to become a hub for sex trafficking as it has been in years past. This bill would move us another step in that direction. Trafficking will continue to be more pervasive each and every day if we continue to turn a blind eye to addressing the increasing demand for sex and the devastation and violence it leaves in its wake.

Thank you,

Elisabeth Townsend

August, J. W. "New California Law Decriminalizing Loitering Led to "Explosion" in Prostitution." *Times of San Diego*, 11 Apr. 2023, timesofsandiego.com/crime/2023/04/10/a-new-california-law-decriminalizing-loitering-has-led-to-more-prostitution/#:~:text=It%20just%20repealed%20misdemeanor%20loitering%20laws%20targeting%20prostitution%2C. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024