



We appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony on HB7452 (Ajello).

Rights4Girls is a human rights organization dedicated to defending the rights of marginalized young women and girls in the U.S. We work to change the narrative and policies that criminalize those who have been impacted by gender-based violence and advocate for solutions that provide survivors with access to safety, justice, and support.

People in prostitution are among the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders. The majority of those in prostitution are not there by choice but due to lack of choice. This includes women, children, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially trans women of color. The vast majority of those in prostitution have experienced violence, including [physical and psychological trauma at the hands of both buyers and exploiters](#). Many others have been trafficked, sexually exploited, are members of the runaway and homeless youth and/or foster care communities, are [disproportionately women and girls of color](#), and/or struggle with substance use disorder.

Historically, people in prostitution were seen as criminals and arrested at disproportionately high rates as compared to buyers, pimps, and traffickers. Today, jurisdictions around the country and the world have begun to recognize that most prostituted people are people in need of services and exit strategies rather than arrest and prosecution. As a result, many jurisdictions around the globe have adopted the Equality Model. This partial decriminalization model provides legal protection to prostituted people from arrest and prosecution while continuing to hold accountable their exploiters. In fact, this past summer [Maine became the first U.S. state to adopt the Equality Model](#), recognizing that no one should be punished for their own exploitation.

Concerning HB7452, we offer the following opinions:

- We support ending the arrest and punishment of prostituted people for loitering.
- While we support ending the arrest of people in prostitution for loitering, we caution that law enforcement should not take such repeal as a signal to stop holding buyers or other exploiters accountable, as has occurred in California and New York after their loitering repeals went into effect. **Failing to continue to hold sex buyers and other exploiters accountable will result in a massive increase in street prostitution and a surge in the demand for commercial sex, leading to increased sex trafficking.** (see enclosed article for reference)
- We also support the elimination of prostitution-related fines for prostituted people. Such fines are an undue burden on women in the sex trade and only serve to keep them further trapped in the industry and under the control of their exploiters.



- We also support the community offenders' program for women. Given that our research shows many low-level women offenders have suffered violence and trauma before entering the system, we support community-based alternatives instead of incarceration that exacerbates women's trauma and disconnects them from their family and their communities—fueling a vicious cycle of harm and further incarceration.
- While we applaud the efforts of this legislation to end the punishment of prostituted people who are some of the most marginalized in our society, we believe that merely ending arrests without a simultaneous investment in additional resources for services for sex trade survivors is only a partial solution.
- We support the addition of resources to aid survivors' ability to exit the sex industry for good and help them and their families start a new path should they so choose.

Again, while we commend efforts to end the arrest of prostituted people for loitering, we feel strongly that ending arrests without investing in resources only provides partial support for this incredibly marginalized population. Sex trade survivors repeatedly tell us that they have a myriad of needs, including affordable housing, criminal record relief, substance use disorder, immigration support, childcare needs, healthcare needs, and other basic necessities. Supportive services are needed to help this population access basic needs and obtain the resources necessary to exit the industry if they seek to do so.

Thank you for allowing us to weigh in on this critical legislation. We hope the committee will heed our words of caution so that the good intentions behind this bill can come to fruition and not replicate the harms similar loitering repeals have caused to communities in other states.

Should you have any additional questions, we welcome the opportunity to speak with you at your convenience. Inquiries can be directed to Peter Baptista (peter@capcomgrp.com) or Nick Hemond (nhemond@capcomgrp.com).

Thank you for your time and consideration.