



March 14, 2023

Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee

Re: In Support of HB 6064

Dear House Judiciary Committee:

We are writing to urge you to vote ‘yes’ on HB 6064, a bill that will protect the human rights of sex workers, sex trafficking survivors, and clients of sex workers by allowing them to report crimes against them without fear of arrest.

We believe that passing HB 6064 will help to enforce the United States' commitment to protect sex workers from violence. In 2011, the United States agreed “that no one should face violence or discrimination in access to public services based on sexual orientation or their status as a person in prostitution” during the Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations. If Rhode Island were to pass HB 6064, it would support the United States' commitment to ending violence against sex workers.

Woodhull Freedom Foundation is a human rights organization focused on the fundamental human right to sexual freedom. We believe your support of HB 6064 will be a necessary defense against future human rights violations in Rhode Island.

Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “*All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination*” Currently, many sex workers and sex trafficking survivors are more afraid of police than they are of violent perpetrators. A misdemeanor prostitution charge can mean losing housing, custody of children, and employment opportunities. Clients of sex workers are the people most likely to encounter a sex trafficking survivor, but reporting to the police can mean criminal charges - in some states felonies - that can affect their employment and family. The fear of prosecution means that they are not protected.

Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads, “*No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.*” If a sex worker, trafficking survivor, or client can be detained for reporting a crime, they will not report it. In fact, in a 2022 survey, 77% of sex workers said that they would report violent crimes to the police if there were an immunity law in place to protect them. Additionally, in a survey performed by COYOTE and Brown University, made possible by a grant from the American Sociological Association, 47% of Rhode Island sex workers and sex trafficking survivors reported being a victim or witnesses of a serious crime they hadn’t reported. That leaves a lot of predators free to target Rhode Island’s most vulnerable citizens.

When they did try to report crimes, 79% of Rhode Island sex workers said that they were turned away without having their report taken. Even worse, 27% of Rhode Island sex workers were arrested or threatened with arrest



while trying to report a violent crime, a direct violation of Article 9. While many police departments have changed their policies around sex workers, that hasn't changed the trauma that sex workers and sex trafficking survivors already have with police.

Today trafficking victims in RI are still being arrested. Their names and photos are published on the local news. Then when they go to court, they can use the affirmative defense law to avoid conviction. However, the traumatic arrest and media coverage have already traumatized them and subjected them to discrimination in housing, employment, and child custody for the rest of their lives. Articles 23 and 25 of the UDHR allow employment housing and social services access. HB 6064 will help to guarantee those human rights.

Many states have passed laws requiring businesses in industries with high rates of trafficking - restaurants, hospitality, carnivals, et. - to display awareness signs asking customers to report potential labor trafficking to the police. Logically, we know that customers are most likely to encounter trafficking victims. There needs to be a clear path for them to come forward and make these reports.

When sex workers and sex trafficking survivors don't have access to equal protections from the justice system because their labor is criminalized, everyone is less safe. Serial killers like Gary Ridgeway, Robert Hansen, Joel Rifkin, the Long Island Killer, Samuel Little, and federal Border Patrol Officer Juan David Ortiz have gotten away with killing sex workers and sex trafficking survivors for years before targeting other marginalized women.

It's time for policymakers to take a vital leadership role in guaranteeing sex workers and sex trafficking survivors equal access to the protections of the justice system.

We urge you to protect the human rights of Rhode Island citizens and **vote 'yes'** on HB 6064.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ricci Joy Levy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ricci Joy Levy  
President & CEO  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation.  
[www.woodhullfoundation.org](http://www.woodhullfoundation.org)