



VERMONT  
NETWORK

**January 8, 2020**  
**House Judiciary Committee**  
**Kara Casey**  
**Director of Economic Empowerment**

My name is Kara Casey and I am the Director of Economic Empowerment at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about these two important bills, H.568 and H.569.

Last session Act 32 directed the Attorney General's office, the Center for Crime Victim Services and the Vermont Network to review and make recommendations on the modernization of the state's current prostitution and human trafficking laws.

The conversation around sex work is a new one for the Network and our coalition. These conversations are happening in other states related to prostitution reform and coalitions like ours have widely divergent views on the topic of decriminalization. The Vermont Network is approaching this issue with a lens of economic justice and safety for those engaged in sex work. The consensus that the group reviewing these laws ultimately came to was the recommendation that Vermont adopt a Good Samaritan law similar to California's SB233. The group also recommended a study committee be formed to examine laws related to prostitution and sex work with a wider group of stakeholders represented. Both of these recommendations are included in H.568.

The immunity from liability in H.568 is an important step in ensuring that if someone experiences or witnesses a crime, especially a violent crime, they are able to seek support and justice without fear of being prosecuted for engaging in sex work. Furthermore, it will provide immunity from a variety of drug crimes for these individuals, when reporting a crime.

We support further conversation around the concept of decriminalizing sex work and are supportive of solutions that will promote the health, safety and wellbeing of sex workers. Around the country, efforts to decriminalize prostitution are being led by sex workers, and we feel like it is essential for the voices of people impacted to be heard. In particular, we hope that the study committee, if established, can find ways to center the voices of people who lack significant agency in their choices and are exchanging sex for survival resources such as housing. In preparation for these conversations, over the fall the Network created an online survey that we distributed to several organizations that engage with sex workers. We heard from a small group of sex workers, but the over whelming response was that the laws in



Vermont that criminalize sex work make it harder for sex workers to stay safe, and that there is a strong overlap between sex work and sexual exploitation.

In rural states like Vermont many folks who are engaged in sex work do so in order to trade resources and meet their basic needs such as housing. Much of the current context around sex work, nationally is centered on urban areas and the realities of those jurisdictions which may be significantly different from Vermont. We need more time to hear from those that are engaged in this here in Vermont, what it looks like in both our urban and more rural areas, and what role survival sex plays in their lives. Poverty can both increase vulnerability to sexual violence and sexual violence can increase vulnerability to poverty. Statistics show that people who live in poverty are twice as likely to experience sexual assault.<sup>1</sup> Individuals who lack sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs may have to resort to bartering for essential goods with sex and are at an increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking. H.569 makes it clear that decriminalization would only apply in the cases of “prostitution between consenting adults”. We support this language conceptually but feel that more conversation as in the study committee included in H.568 will serve to further mitigate any potential negative impacts that decriminalization could lead to.

We feel as though the immunities in H.568 are a good first step in ensuring that sex workers in Vermont are afforded the safety and protections that they deserve and look forward to continuing conversation about how decriminalization efforts would impact communities in Vermont, especially the most marginalized in our state.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008