

## The Truth about the Burlington Charter Change and the Voices of Survivors

### 5. PROPOSED CHARTER CHANGE TO REMOVE CITY COUNCIL AUTHORITY TO REGULATE SEX WORKERS

"Shall the Charter of the City of Burlington, Acts of 1949, No. 298 as amended, be further amended by removing in its entirety §48(7) so as to remove from City Council's enumerated powers the ability:

YES

~~(7) To restrain and suppress houses of ill fame and disorderly houses, and to punish common prostitutes and persons consorting therewith."~~

NO

It has become very clear over the past many months that House Representative Selene Colburn and the Progressive led Burlington City Council have an agenda that they are forcing on Burlington City and on our State.

On March 1, 2022 Burlington City Voters were asked to vote yes or no to ballot item #5 (above). Although the item passed, it is highly unlikely that Burlington voters recognize the detrimental effect this will have on their community, our state, and our nation.

For months New Englanders Against Sexual Exploitation (NEASE) has brought to the Burlington City Council expert testimony from NEASE members, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), World Without Exploitation (WWE), and dozens of victim/survivors of sex trafficking and prostitution.

Prostitution is an extremely dangerous trade. Kidnapping, rape, beatings, robbery, shootings, stabbings, forced drug and alcohol addictions, and numerous other physical, psychological, and emotional abuses result from prostituting men, women, and children. Victims are often the most vulnerable in our society; those same vulnerable people that our local and state governments are duty bound to protect.

We have to question where this push to fully decriminalize sex work in Vermont came from. It, in fact, did not stem from Vermont or Vermonters. It has its roots in an organization called "Decriminalize Sex Work" and is based in Texas. The Vermont Secretary of State Lobbyist Photo Book (2021-2022) lists four lobbyists from the Necrason Group (Montpelier Based Firm) hired to support their efforts to decriminalize the sex trade. Decriminalize Sex Work is a national organization pursuing a state-by-state strategy to end the prohibition of consensual adult prostitution in the United States.

- A Public Question Committee Registration Statement (Elections Division/Office of the Secretary of State) was filed by David Mickenberg on January 28, 2022. The "Public Question" was listed as "Burlington Charter Change Question #5"
- A Campaign Finance Disclosure Statement filed on January 28, 2022 shows \$0 dollars for that period and also \$0 Campaign to Date.

- A Campaign Finance Disclosure Statement filed on February 18, 2022, shows that a Registrant going by the name of Campaign to Vote Yes on 5 for Equity, Safety, and Dignity shows \$0 from previous campaign and \$0 carried forward to current campaign. It also shows \$11, 689.15 in their summary of expenditures to influence the Burlington City Charter vote.
- The most recent Campaign Finance Disclosure Statement filed on March 4, 2022 shows \$0 from previous campaign, \$0 carried forward to the current campaign, and an additional amount of expenditures totaling \$2,136.28.
- The Contact Name on all of these forms is listed as David Mickenberg and/or shows an email of [mickenberg@gmail.com](mailto:mickenberg@gmail.com)
- David Mickenberg is one of the four lobbyists hired by Decriminalize Sex Work through Necrason Group.

So the question remains, where did this money come from? Who is funding this push to decriminalize prostitution in Vermont? And is the safety of Vermont and Vermonters for sale?

I'm going to leave with you voices from trafficking and prostitution victim/survivors who have lived experience in the sex trade. They are the voices of Vermont Future.

**Alisa Bernard, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy, Thistle Farms:** “Sex Trafficking exists because there is a demand for commercial sex. When that demand is normalized through policies, or in this case abolishing policies, it outpaces the supply. Loosening policy-specifically making pimps, sex buyers, and brothel owners legal, simply creates easier onramps into the sex trade for those already marginalized among us. You can be sure it will not be wealthy upper middleclass white women flocking to the sex trade for chances to feel empowered. It will be women and girls of color, impoverished people, indigenous people, and trans women who enter the sex trade.” “Regardless if we were trafficked or entered the sex trade by ‘choice,’ the system of prostitution cause us long-term harm and as the victims of the very violence you are considering giving a free pass to, we hope you will hear our voices.”

**Felicia Ingram, Assistant Director of Operations, Prevention Works Joint Task Force & Coalition:** “I have spoken to survivors in Connecticut and across the United States and I can tell you from conversations I have had with survivors, prostitution is dangerous, the violence which occurs on behalf of buyers and traffickers is substantial.”

**Bekah Charleston, Trafficking/Prostitution Survivor:** “I was trafficked through the legal system of prostitution in Nevada. And I know exactly what it felt like being inside those dusty, dirty, disgusting hallways, having to meet men and turn as many customers as you can. Because the House took 50% off the top, and then my pimp took the other 50%. So it was never enough for either of them. I always had to show up at every single bell, and keep going, no matter what my body was telling me.” “Prostitution is about the power and control men have over women’s

bodies. That women are a commodity to be bought and sold. And I think once you've lived a single day in the life, once you've had a single act of prostitution, you know that is not true. You tell yourself those lies, to get up every day, and look at yourself in the mirror and get ready for work again that night. But once you're out of it, you can't help but look and see the destruction, that it will lead waste to your life. That no little girl ever wakes up one day and says, "Mommy, I want to be a prostitute someday. That doesn't happen. Those are the things that people are forced, manipulated, and coerced into doing."

**Stacy Reed, Prostitution and Trafficking Survivor, Peer Mentor Advocate, RIA House:** "I was turned out when I was 14 years old. Every time I tried to run away, there were no resources for me. Not a day that I've ever spent in the life of prostitution was okay for me."

**Mary Speta, Chief Impact Officer, Amirah, Inc:** "Amirah, Inc. is a New England nonprofit providing exit and aftercare services to women who have survived sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. 61% of the women they have served in their long-term residential recovery program were trafficked in Vermont at some point during their exploitation. Amirah has learned through these women's stories that the commercial sex trade is particularly active in Burlington, Montpelier, and Stowe, and much of the sex trade is directly connected to gang activity in Burlington."

**Tricia Grant, Sex Trafficking Survivor:** "So if you're considering legalizing prostitution, my message is, talk to survivors of trafficking. Talk to people who have walked through this. Talk to people who have experienced this firsthand. Not just people who are advocating for decriminalization."

**Audrey Morrissey, Prostitution and Trafficking Survivor, Associate Director, My Life, My Choice:** "People say it's the oldest profession. It's actually the oldest oppression."

There are so many thousands of other victim/survivors voices that go unheard. I ask you, please consider them today.

In the words of Governor Scott: "I don't think that's what Vermont needs at this point."  
(Vermont Daily Chronicle – March 7, 2022)

Respectfully Submitted,  
Maggie J. Kerrin, New Englanders Against Sexual Exploitation (NEASE), Vermont Chair

April 28, 2022  
House Government Operations Committee