

01/26/2026



THE ISHTAR COLLECTIVE

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H588 My name is Henri Bynx and I am the co-founder and co-director of The Ishtar Collective which works to promote public health, safety, and evidence-based policies that protect sex workers and survivors of trafficking. We also provide direct services, helping people to leave exploitative situations, and help with emergency housing, food, medical care, and other basic necessities because individuals are vulnerable to exploitation when essential needs go unmet.

While this legislation focuses on licensing for massage therapists and massage establishments, many of the discussions around licensing are driven by concerns about human trafficking. It is important that policy decisions reflect the realities of trafficking and are grounded in evidence, to avoid unintentionally harming workers or communities.

Human trafficking is a serious crime involving force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. Vermont already has strong anti-trafficking laws that provide law enforcement with the tools needed to investigate and prosecute traffickers. Research and experience nationally show that additional criminalization of unlicensed massage work does not reduce trafficking and can, in fact, worsen conditions for vulnerable workers.¹

When enforcement efforts target workplaces, immigrant communities, or unlicensed businesses under the guise of anti-trafficking, workers who are not trafficked may face arrest, deportation, or loss of livelihood. Fear of criminalization discourages victims from seeking help and erodes trust in institutions, pushing workers into more isolated and unsafe conditions. Asian and migrant massage workers, in particular, experience racialized and gendered policing, which can amplify harm rather than increase safety.²

We want to be clear that we support massage therapists who wish to obtain licensure. Licensing can be a positive tool when implemented with accessible requirements, training support, and protections for workers who face barriers such as cost, language, or documentation challenges. Our concern is ensuring that any licensing system does not rely on punitive enforcement or criminalization, which can undermine safety for the very communities it is intended to protect.

Trafficking is most effectively addressed through prevention and protection for survivors. Rights-based strategies include:

- Expanding access to safe and fair labor opportunities, affordable housing, and healthcare;
- Providing culturally competent outreach, language access, and immigration support;
- Strengthening labor protections and access to resources for vulnerable workers;

- Guaranteeing the protections and rights of individuals who have been trafficked; and
- Encouraging survivor leadership in efforts to combat human trafficking.

We encourage the committee to ensure that any licensing or enforcement provisions support worker safety and economic opportunity while avoiding unnecessary criminalization. By centering worker protections and support for vulnerable individuals, Vermont can effectively address trafficking and support trained massage professionals.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

1. A study analyzing decades of FBI Uniform Crime Reports and CDC data found no evidence that licensing massage therapists reduces prostitution-related crimes or STIs. (IDEAS/RePEc, 2020) <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eme/jepppp/jepp-06-2020-0034.html>
2. Shih, Elena. (2021). *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking, and Advocacy in the United States*. University of California Press.
3. Freedom Network USA. (2024, July 8). *Prevention as preemption: Primary prevention as a framework to constructively fight trafficking*. Freedom Network USA. <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/2024/07/08/prevention-as-preemption/>