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The Ishtar Collective  
LD 1435

Hello and thank you for your audience today,

My name is Henri Bynx. I am the co-founder and co-director of the Ishtar Collective; an anti-trafficking and sex worker rights organization in your neighboring state of Vermont. We work through policy, mutual aid, and direct services to uplift survivors and sex workers in Vermont.

I have been serving my community beside trafficking survivors and consensual sex workers for three years, since I founded Ishtar Collective during the early months of the Pandemic.

As I testify today, two trafficking survivors that were served by members of our collective are transitioning into their new home, uplifted by community members who spent the weekend moving them.

I am here today from a place of experience as a consensual sex worker and a community organizer to express my concerns around the language of this bill. Firstly, I'd like to bring attention to section 2 of this bill which would create a protocol for law enforcement interactions with survivors and sex workers.

Subsection 2- A requires department of public safety to consult with "relevant stakeholders" - anti-trafficking organizations, sexual assault organizations, domestic violence advocacy organizations and crisis services to adopt a model protocol - this omits sex worker-run/focused orgs and harm reduction groups - law enforcement will inevitably interact with adult consensual sex workers, but the protocol may not have any guidance for those interactions. Law enforcement historically have had abusive and unsafe interactions with sex workers disproportionate to other populations they interact with - this ends up spilling over to trafficking victims as well.

We need to make sure that as law enforcement navigates these waters, that they have ample resources and support to best know how and when to interact with sex workers and survivors alike, and for this reason I believe section two needs further review. In order to provide robust care, there must be further protocol established to protect trafficking survivors and sex workers while dealing with police.

Secondly, I'd like to address the language change in terms of prostitution based language versus "commercial sexual exploitation."

I feel it conflates instances of consensual sex work with exploitation, and in that, feeds a larger narrative that oftentimes erases the needs and wisdom of survivors and sex workers alike, whose expertise should be lended to in matters like labour exploitation.

Painting in these broad strokes around the interactions that only the people we are speaking of can define is a dangerously disempowering move toward the people we need to be protective of, as it allows little room for context and nuance, and may endanger more people who are NOT committing violent offenses by vilifying a spectrum of interactions with sex workers, not least of all contacting them in the first place.

The bill's language struck down the term "prostitution" in favor of "commercial sexual exploitation" in more than one subsection, and while neither terminology is picture perfect, at least the criminality of the word "prostitute" connotes a person giving consent, as a person charged with prostitution could be assumed to have consented to an act of prostitution at the time of arrest.

As a consensual sex worker, I am part of a demographic that will not be accurately represented by language like this, and in that I fear there won't be the positive impacts you're hoping for in this policy. I am confident that you, our neighbors in the state of Maine will continue to consider this bill carefully.

Thank you for your time.