

First, I would like to thank you all for taking the time to hear from us regarding these bills.

My name is Crystale Vega and I live in Lewiston Maine. I am here today to ask you to support LD1435 An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation and LD1436 An Act to Provide Remedies for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation. I am a survivor of the commercial sex trade who currently works with individuals currently incarcerated and those reacclimating back to life after incarceration. I have two felony drug charges that are the result of my trafficker placing the blame on me for the criminal activity that he was involved in. I was told that I am to keep my mouth shut, stand before the judge and plead guilty, or I would be shot the minute I walked out of jail. My mother, father and children's lives were also threatened. I was told I was not worth anything and he was the only person who would ever love me.

I see time and time again how the effects of past criminal charges hinder the growth and healing of other survivors. How heartbreaking to see someone completely turn their life around only to be denied a job or housing due to a criminal charge from their past. To see my history played out time and time again in the lives others is almost unbearable at times. More often than not these past charges were the result of fear and or coercion. These women and men are forced to take these charges no questions asked because they know the repercussions of the alternative. They are forced into a jail cell, not given any services and then released back out on the street to have the cycle continue. The only way to break this cycle is to recognize that these individuals are the victims not criminals. Each and every one of them is worthy of being seen. They are all someones daughter, mother, son, father and friend. They are failed over and over again by a system that claims that they care. But I know from firsthand experience that that system is broken, and changes need to be made to ensure the survival of those seeking help and those still trapped in the viciousness of the commercial sex trade. Most are not as fortunate as I am. I am able to use my history to help others. Most are left circling the drain hoping someone will extend a hand and just care.

The passing of these bills together ensures that changes can be put into place to save lives here in Maine. We would be taking the first steps to show survivors that they are worthy and their lives matter. WE ARE SURVIVORS, WE ARE NOT CRIMINALS.

Thank you for your time today.