



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: Maine Relay 711

Holly T. Sargent

625 York Street

York, ME 03909

(207) 358-4793

Holly.Sargent@legislature.maine.gov

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Testimony of Rep. Holly T. Sargent in support of
LD 1435, An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and distinguished members of the Committee on Judiciary. I am Holly Sargent, and I proudly represent District 147, which is the town of York. I am testifying today in favor of **LD 1435, An Act to Reduce Sexual Exploitation**.

Many of you know that I am newly elected and, like my fellow freshmen, I am learning to navigate the political pathways of power and policy. I don't think my mentors would necessarily be pleased that one of my first co-sponsored bills has the word "sex" in its title, but the topic is too important, the problem is too pervasive for me to shirk. I am honored to stand by the courageous and bold Lois Reckitt to support this bill.

I have spent a great deal of my career studying, advocating for and establishing programs advancing gender equity and securing the rights of women around the world. While I was Associate Dean at Harvard's Kennedy School I founded the Harvard Women's Leadership Board and helped develop the Women and Public Policy Program. The program both trains women leaders and addresses the public issues that profoundly affect women and girls.

One cannot spend decades in support of women and not collide with the ugly reality of sexual exploitation. It is as old as the Bible and as new as the latest pornographic meme. It is global and local. It is here in Maine, whether in a 13-year-old girl pimped by her stepfather in Buxton or in a woman from Eastern Europe trafficked into our state for sex. It is entwined with poverty and abuse. It is often amplified by our culture and strengthened by a lingering misogyny.

LD 1435 takes it on and turns the tables. Rather than continuing the centuries old approach of blaming and shaming the so called "provider," it faces the issue of demand. Who is the buyer and what responsibility should they bear? How do we raise the stakes and focus on the "business" of sexual exploitation reducing the demand? As the non-profit Demand Abolition puts it, "No Buyers- No Business." This bill takes aim at those who buy sex with children and disabled adults. It recognizes the impact of traffickers who lure and entrap young people, largely women, into this life. It removes labels and some of the stigma by decriminalizing the seller. It is a first step toward a new life.

This bill is fashioned after the partial decriminalization model that has been called the Nordic Model because of its origins in Scandinavia. Early results in Sweden show declines in street prostitution and dramatic positive results for survivors.

LD 1435 is not a panacea. The issue is entrenched and complicated. We will need to observe results and guard against unintended consequences. What LD 1435 might be called is the first step in a reckoning. I hope you will take the courageous step to give it a chance.

I appreciate your time and consideration. I am happy to answer your questions and be available for the work session.