



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF:

### **LD 1888 "An Act to Combat Organized Criminal Enterprises in Maine"**

#### **THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Good Afternoon Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Amy Arata and I represent House District 104, which includes New Gloucester and part of Gray. It is my privilege to introduce LD 1888, "*An Act to Combat Organized Criminal Enterprises in Maine.*"

This bill creates the criminal offense of racketeering, which allows for prosecution of individuals who are members of a racketeering enterprise when two or more qualifying criminal acts have been committed by members of the criminal enterprise. The bill also provides a mechanism for assets wrongfully obtained through a racketeering enterprise to be forfeited by amending the criminal asset forfeiture laws.

As I have shared with this committee previously, I became aware that sex trafficking has become a serious problem in Maine when I accidentally rented a commercial store front to an accused sex trafficker last November under the guise that he would be running a different business. His business partner had distinctive characteristics that are unusual in Maine. The construction workers who were renovating the space without permits and without my permission also had these same distinctive characteristics.

As a real estate investor, I know how difficult it is to find employees who have construction skills. These men had skills that were better than one would expect sex traffickers to have. I have read articles about the hundreds of illegal cannabis-growing operations in Maine, and that they had also illegally renovated buildings.

The operators shared the same distinctive characteristics as the accused sex traffickers who had rented space from me. The articles also noted that those who worked in the cannabis-growing operations also appeared malnourished and isolated, and may have been victims of human trafficking. This led me to ask law enforcement if there could be a connection between the sex trafficking that I had been made aware of and the illegal cannabis growing enterprises. I was told that this is a possibility. Subsequently, another crime committed by people with the same distinctive characteristic was discovered in March, in which elderly people were tricked into converting their savings into gold bars, to be handed over to the criminal for "safe keeping". If these crimes are all related, we truly need this emergency law to address this serious threat as it is metastasizing throughout Maine's large and small towns.

The language for this bill was developed in consultation with law enforcement and prosecutors from Maine and other states. The language reflects both their experience in other states and what they are beginning to see emerge here in Maine. This bill addresses patterns of behavior that organizations and criminal gangs will utilize to establish their area of control, initiate members, intimidate witnesses, and eliminate competition. The enhanced criminal penalties will be a deterrent for those who would organize such criminal enterprises.

Sex trafficking victims and their advocates have already testified before this committee on a previous bill to convey the seriousness of this problem in Maine, and they are grateful that you took their testimonies seriously. In order to avoid redundancy, they aren't here to testify today. However, others who have experience with law enforcement will testify and be able to verify that this legislation is necessary and it is an emergency for the people of Maine. Thank you for your consideration of this very important legislation.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amy B. Arata". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Amy" being more prominent and the last name "Arata" following in a similar style.

Amy B. Arata  
State Representative