

**April 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 Testimony of Desiree D. Demos, Senior Director of Community Based Programs at Living in Freedom Together-LIFT, in support of LD 1435 An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation and LD 1436 An Act to Provide Remedies for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation.**

To Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Desiree Demos, and I am a Survivor of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and the Senior Director of Community Based Programs at Living in Freedom Together-LIFT, a Survivor-Led organization in Worcester MA. I am writing today in strong support of *LD 1435 An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation and LD 1436 An Act to Provide Remedies for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation.*

I am not resident of Maine, but given its proximity to Massachusetts it ensures that I work with many survivors who have been impacted by the sex trade in your state.

When survivors exit the sex trade it is critical that they can equally access employment, housing, and community resources for continued exiting support. Many survivors are barred from accessing basic needs such as housing, and key resources in our communities due to criminal records associated with their exploitation. The time has come to stop penalizing survivors of the sex trade for our compounded victimization in the violent and oppressive system that is prostitution. This is the only system where it is standard operating procedure to charge the victim of a crime as criminals themselves, and most often not even arrest the actual criminal.

Throughout my many years in the sex trade, I have been raped, repeatedly beaten, kidnapped, held hostage, and propelled into a dark hole of substance use and mental health disorders. This is the daily reality of the **majority** of those trapped in the sex trade. We need to systematically remove stigmatizing language used towards survivors so that their exploitation does not continue to define their lives. ‘Prostitute’ implies a choice, whereas ‘Exploitation’ is an act of violence that happened to the survivor.

We need legislatures to publicly acknowledge that this is not a victimless crime by decriminalizing survivors, eliminating stigmatizing language in the judicial system, and increasing penalties for perpetrators, thus advancing civil rights in Maine, and throughout the nation. Please vote “ought to pass” on LDs 1435 and 1436.

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