

February 2, 2026

To: Members of the Maine Joint Judiciary Committee

From: Sarah Johnston Ellis, Director, TJP Advocacy

RE: Testimony for Advancing LD 2168: An Act to Increase Accountability for Persons Engaged in Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Dear Members of the Maine Join Judiciary Committee,

On behalf of TJP Advocacy, I write in strong support of LD 2168, *An Act to Increase Accountability for Persons Engaged in Commercial Sexual Exploitation*.

In 2023, Maine demonstrated national leadership by enacting LD 1435, *An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation*, and LD 1436, *An Act to Provide Remedies for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation*, championed by the late Representative Lois Reckitt. These landmark reforms reflected a commitment to evidence-based, trauma-informed policy by shifting accountability away from individuals who are exploited and toward those who profit from and fuel exploitation¹.

These laws expanded access to post-conviction relief, reduced barriers to safety and stability for survivors, and established Maine as a model for survivor-centered justice. Since their enactment, Maine has made meaningful progress in aligning its legal framework with the realities faced by individuals impacted by trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. LD 2168 builds directly on this foundation and represents a necessary next step in sustaining and strengthening that progress.

Over the past year, Maine has continued to confront the realities of commercial sexual exploitation in visible and urgent ways. In 2025, TJP Advocacy hosted a legislative screening of *The Right Track*² at the State House, bringing together lawmakers, subject matter experts, and community members to engage directly with survivor experiences and the systems that shape them. That conversation was reinforced by recent criminal cases across the state, including the federal indictment of two Bangor-area men on sex trafficking and child exploitation charges³, the arrest of eleven men in connection with a massage parlor investigation who were ultimately directed into a deterrence program⁴, and the ongoing prosecution of a Yarmouth physician accused of trafficking and exploiting multiple victims⁵.

¹ <https://www.maine.gov/housedems/news/governor-signs-reckitt-bill-partially-decriminalize-prostitution>

² <https://righttrackfilm.com/>

³ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-me/pr/two-bangor-area-men-indicted-sex-trafficking-and-child-exploitation-offenses>

⁴ <https://www.wmtw.com/article/rockland-maine-human-trafficking-massage-parlor-front/63595698>

⁵ <https://wgme.com/news/local/maine-doctor-to-appear-in-court-on-sex-trafficking-charges-yarmouth-freeport-crime-peter-odonnell-a-envy-prostitution-perform-sexual-services-for-clients>

Taken together, these events underscore that commercial sexual exploitation is not an abstract or distant problem. It affects communities across Maine, involves individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, and requires sustained, coordinated policy responses that prioritize accountability and prevention.

A 2025 pilot study conducted by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation and the Epik Project, with support from The Jensen Project, documented 231 unique sex buyers attempting to purchase sex in Maine over two months. Notably, the data reflected a particularly high volume of attempted sex-buying activity in the Bangor area, highlighting the presence of sustained demand within local communities.

Public opinion reflects this reality. A June 2025 multi-state voter survey, conducted by TJP Advocacy found that Maine residents rank sex trafficking among the most important public policy concerns in the nation and strongly support holding buyers accountable while expanding protections and services for survivors.

LD 2168 would make clear to Mainers and to those across the country who view Maine as a beacon of hope in addressing sex trafficking that sex buying is not a victimless crime. It fuels commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, and meaningful deterrence requires holding buyers accountable. LD 2168 was modeled in part after legislation passed last year in New Hampshire that instituted a \$500 fine for first-time offenders charged with solicitation⁶. These strengthened penalties would align Maine with a growing national movement, as at least 18 states this session have introduced or are considering legislation to increase fines, fees, or penalties for buyers of sex.

Importantly, the fines collected under LD 2168 would also provide needed support for individuals seeking to exit exploitation. We recommend that these funds be thoughtfully directed to support survivors through a designated victim compensation fund or through grants to service providers offering housing, emergency services, and long-term care.

As Maine continues to strengthen its response to commercial sexual exploitation, we respectfully encourage consideration of several complementary strategies that have demonstrated success in other states. Comprehensive statewide coordination models, such as those adopted in Texas, Ohio, and Delaware, and being recommended in Massachusetts in their 5 Year Plan to address sex trafficking released last month⁷, have improved service delivery, accountability, and data-sharing. Strengthening legal consequences for buyers, including elevating certain offenses to felony status, as seen in Utah, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Montana, and North Carolina, has also been shown to reduce repeat offenses and deter demand. In addition, dedicating buyer-generated fines and fees to accessible, survivor-focused service funds that support both direct services and financial compensation would help ensure sustainable access to housing,

⁶ <https://www.wmur.com/article/law-penalties-human-trafficking-new-hampshire-8625/65618811>

⁷ <https://www.mass.gov/news/healey-driscoll-administration-releases-five-year-statewide-plan-to-address-sex-trafficking>



130 E John Carpenter Fwy,
Suite 440, Irving, TX 75062

info@tjpadvocacy.org
www.TJPAdvocacy.org

counseling, legal advocacy, and employment support without unnecessary administrative barriers.

Maine has shown that balanced, survivor-centered policy can produce meaningful change. The passage of LD 1435 and LD 1436 laid a strong foundation. LD 2168 offers an important opportunity to build on that legacy by reinforcing accountability and strengthening systems that support survivor exit and long-term stability.

We respectfully urge the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary to advance LD 2168 and continue Maine's leadership in addressing commercial sexual exploitation with compassion, rigor, and evidence-based policy.

Thank you for your consideration, and please do not hesitate to contact us if we may provide additional information.

Warmly,

Sarah Johnston Ellis
Director, TJP Advocacy
info@tjpadvocacy.org
(805) 801-1700