



June 10, 2009

Women need rehabilitation not penalties

The Rhode Island Chapter of the National Organization of Women (RI NOW) opposes 5044A because it imposes fines upon, and incarcerates, women who are clearly struggling to make ends meet. It will:

- Place more women in our already full state prisons
- Make it harder for women to return to work, thus forcing them back into prostitution
- Perpetuate the cycle of prostitution and poverty
- Create a narrow and ineffective definition for human trafficking

According to the Family Life Center, Rhode Island could save \$440,000 per year by not incarcerating prostitutes. If the purpose of this bill, as has been portrayed, is to help get these women “off the streets” then legislators could better achieve this by taking this money saved and putting it toward social service and police education programs.

RI NOW also believes that this bill creates a narrow definition for human trafficking that does nothing for victims of human trafficking and could harm efforts underway to pass good legislation designed to protect these victims. If Rhode Island is serious about protecting victims of human trafficking then legislators ought to focus their efforts on passing the trafficking bills currently in both the House and the Senate.

RI NOW supports efforts to eliminate the practice of forcing women to prostitute against their will. However, we do not support increasing punishments for the individual prostitutes. RI NOW sees prostitution as a complex, social and political issue that cannot be solved by increasing rates of incarceration for the prostitutes. RI NOW opposes any legislation related to prostitution that has unintended consequences for prostitutes. We wish to reduce the unnecessary incarceration of sex workers that this bill proposes, because we believe that this actually increases the likelihood that they will return to prostitution. Further, if the prostitutes have a criminal record, they will have a much harder time after they are released from prison in finding a job, which would increase the likelihood that they will be forced to return to prostitution to survive. This makes prostitution their only option. RI NOW believes that these women need rehabilitation NOT imprisonment and penalties.

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