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ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

TESTIMONY ON 26-H 7201, RELATING TO CRIMINAL OFFENSES - COMMERCIAL SEXUAL ACTIVITY April 9, 2026

This bill would require persons found guilty of procuring sexual conduct for money to pay a fee of \$1,000 to participate in a “commercial sex buyer’s accountability program,” where they would be instructed on, among other things, the “causes of prostitution and its relationship to human trafficking.” As a long-time opponent of the criminalization of prostitution, the ACLU of Rhode Island opposes this legislation. We believe that the legislature should be considering decriminalizing this conduct rather than imposing additional penalties on individuals who engage in it.¹

A few years ago, the National ACLU issued a detailed research report on the topic of sex work decriminalization.² The report reviewed over eighty empirical studies that have researched the impact of the criminalization and decriminalization of prostitution, and it is worth highlighting that report’s conclusion:

“In sum, the research points to negative impacts of criminalization on the physical safety, health, and financial well-being of sex workers, with repercussions for clients seeking consensual sex between adults. . . . Overall, the evidence suggests that going from less to more prohibitive laws on adult consensual sex work is damaging to sex workers and appears to have little impact on curbing trafficking or other crimes.”

In addition, we are concerned that by having the proposed program discuss the “causes of prostitution and its relationship to human trafficking,” the bill inappropriately encourages the conflation of voluntary sex work with the scourge of human trafficking and gives the erroneous impression that all sex work is coerced.

Finally, we note that this bill provides that \$100 of the fee imposed would go to the arresting law enforcement agency. The ACLU generally opposes the direct funneling of fines from criminal offenses to police departments on the grounds that it can be treated like a bounty by some police agencies and improperly skew law enforcement priorities.

For all these reasons, we are constrained to oppose this bill. Thank you for considering our views.

¹ For that reason, we are supporting another bill being heard tonight, H-8057, which would do just that.

² https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/aclu_sex_work_decrim_research_brief.pdf