

Call Off Your Old
Tired Ethics



June 2nd 2023

Dear Senate Judiciary Committee

We are writing to urge you to vote yes on S892 which will allow sex workers, sex trafficking survivors, and our customers to report heinous crimes like sex trafficking without fear of arrest.

Currently, many sex workers and sex trafficking survivors are more afraid of police than they are of violent perpetrators. A misdemeanor prostitution charge can mean losing housing, custody of children, and employment opportunities. Clients of sex workers are the people most likely to encounter a sex trafficking survivor, but reporting to the police can mean criminal charges - in some states felonies - that can affect their employment and family.

Today trafficking victims in RI are still being arrested. Their names and photos are published on the local news. Then when they go to court they can use the affirmative defense law to avoid conviction, however, the traumatic arrest and media coverage have already traumatized them and subjected them to discrimination in housing, employment, and child custody for the rest of their lives. This is documented in the [RI ACLU's 2022 Report to the RI H5250 Legislative Study Commission](#))

In a [survey](#) performed by COYOTE and Brown University, made possible by a grant from the American Sociological Association, 47% of Rhode Island sex workers and sex trafficking survivors reported being a victim or witnesses of a serious crime

they hadn't reported. That leaves a lot of predators free to target Rhode Island's most vulnerable citizens.

When they did try to report crimes, 79% of Rhode Island sex workers said that they were turned away without having their report taken. Even worse, 27% of Rhode Island sex workers were arrested or threatened with arrest while trying to report a violent crime. While many police departments have changed their policies around sex workers, that hasn't changed the trauma that sex workers and sex trafficking survivors already have with police.

In a [2022 survey](#), 77% of sex workers said that they would report violent crimes to the police if there were an immunity law in place to protect them.

Many states have passed laws requiring businesses in industries with high rates of trafficking - restaurants, hospitality, carnivals, etc - to display awareness signs asking customers to report potential labor trafficking to the police. Logically, we know that customers are the people most likely to encounter trafficking victims. There needs to be a clear path for them to come forward and make these reports.

Without immunity in reporting, customers and other sex workers are left to attempt to "rescue" victims on their own, potentially creating more dangerous situations.

When sex workers and sex trafficking survivors don't have access to equal protections from the justice system because their sex is criminalized, everyone is less safe. Serial killers like Gary Ridgeway, Robert Hansen, Joel Rifkin, the Long Island Killer, Samuel Little, and federal Border Patrol Officer Juan David Ortiz have gotten away with killing sex workers and sex trafficking survivors for years before targeting other marginalized women. It's time for policymakers to take a strong leadership role in guaranteeing sex workers and sex trafficking survivors equal access to the protections of the justice system.

Please vote yes on S892

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Ramona Flour *COYOTE RI Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, Rhode Island (COYOTE RI)* is a group of current and former sex workers and sex trafficking survivors working on "policy" for improved health and safety for people in Rhode Island's sex industry. Learn more at www.coyoteri.org