

Immunity in Reporting Laws: How to Stop Serial Killers and Sex Traffickers

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Topic: Legal | Knowledge Level: Beginner

Tara Burns, MA

Without the ability to report crimes without being arrested for prostitution, sex workers and sex trafficking survivors are easy victims. Burns' 2015 thesis action research on the lived experiences and policy recommendations of people in Alaska's sex trade uncovered the experiences of Alaskan sex workers and sex trafficking survivors in trying to report serious crimes to the police and led to Alaska passing the U.S.'s first immunity in reporting laws for sex workers. After the law was passed, Alaskan sex workers and sex trafficking survivors reported crimes like child pornography, sexual abuse of a minor, and information about an unsolved murder. One sex trafficking case Burns helped report illustrated the need for sex work clients to also be afforded immunity in reporting. Most recently in Alaska, a brave sex worker stole a phone containing videos of a horrific murder and reported the serial killer Brian Steven Smith to police. Rhode Island currently has two immunity bills (one of which Burns helped draft), which illustrate the importance of local context and critical thinking in crafting effective immunity laws. In Rhode Island and nationally, an ongoing qualitative survey of sex workers and sex trafficking survivors allows criminalized victims and witnesses a safe way to share their stories with lawmakers. Currently, seven states have immunity from prostitution laws for people reporting crimes, and there is quite a bit of variety in the laws. This presentation will explain the elements of effective immunity laws and the public education that has to happen after immunity laws are passed.

Trigger Warning: This presentation contains information (written, spoken, or visual) that may be triggering or (re)traumatizing to attendees.

Presentation Objectives

- Describe the importance of action research in achieving relevant policy change for sex workers and sex trafficking survivors
- Convey the important elements of an effective immunity bill and the importance of bills being rooted in an understanding of local contexts
- Use examples and storytelling to help attendees understand the importance of immunity bills in fighting sex trafficking and other heinous crimes against sex workers and sex trafficking survivors

About the Presenter

Tara Burns, MA

Tara Burns serves as the Research and Policy Director of COYOTE RI (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics Rhode Island). Burns is dedicated to advancing evidence-based policies that prioritize the rights and well-being of people in the sex industry.