

Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center

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TO: House Judiciary Committee
RE: written testimony of Joel Shapiro, Executive Director, Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center, in support of SB 596

Chair Williamson and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center supports SB 596. The Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center works to support human trafficking victims and survivors by providing *pro bono* legal services, raising awareness, and educating the public and policymakers on human trafficking issues.

SB 596 is an important step forward in protecting victims of sex trafficking by allowing for the reporting of person felonies without fear of criminal prosecution for prostitution. One of the fundamental concepts in understanding and addressing sex trafficking is that a person engaged in prostitution that involves force, fraud, or coercion is being exploited. That person is not a criminal, but a victim of crime.

Quite often, however, it is not readily apparent whether or not prostitution activity involves force, fraud, or coercion. That is a distinction that can be amorphous, rather than being an obvious, bright-line standard. Further, there is a great deal of research that establishes that persons engaged in commercial sex – whether as a victim of sex trafficking or as a sex worker – are part of a vulnerable population that is often subject to violent assaults and other crimes.

SB 596 extends protection from criminal liability for prostitution, when reporting a person felony, regardless of a showing of force, fraud, or coercion. This means that a crime victim need not worry whether she or he could provide evidence to prove that the person is a victim of sex trafficking before feeling safe to call 9-1-1 or subsequently reporting a person felony to law enforcement authorities.

SB 596 is a straight-forward, narrowly-tailored bill. Enacting this bill would establish a clear policy that sex trafficking victims and sex workers must be protected from violent assaults and other person felonies. When subjected to violent crimes, sex trafficking victims and sex workers would not be forced to choose between holding the offender accountable or facing their own criminal exposure. Enacting SB 596 would help reduce violent felonies and would extend protection to a vulnerable population.

The Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center encourages passage of SB 596.

The Trafficking Victims & Survivors Law Center is a program of
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