



Sex Workers Project

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PRESS STATEMENT

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SAN FRANCISCO BALLOT INITIATIVE ON PROSTITUTION WOULD HAVE REDUCED VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS

NEW YORK CITY (November 7, 2008) – Another kind of history was almost made in San Francisco during this election, where citizens voted on a proposition that would have prohibited the use of public funds to enforce laws criminalizing prostitution and mandated that police instead investigate crimes against sex workers. “We are very proud that 42% of San Francisco voters - 91,017 people counted so far - voted for a saner and safer response to sex work,” said Carol Leigh, a long time sex worker rights activist in San Francisco.

The measure would not only have saved considerable law enforcement resources – estimated at \$11.4 million in 2007 - it would have reduced sex workers’ vulnerability to violence – at the hands of police, clients, employers, and community members – resulting from their criminalized status. Additionally, it would have mandated enforcement of existing laws against coercion, extortion, battery, rape and other violent crimes, regardless of the victim’s status as a sex worker – thereby addressing widespread violence against sex workers, a concern of the propositions’ proponents and opponents alike.

“Social stigma and police abuses partner to further the marginalization of sex workers in all areas of the industry. This not only makes us targets for violence but prevents us from accessing basic needs, like health care and affordable housing, that are every person’s right,” says Dylan Wolfe of Sex Workers Action New York (SWANK).

Proposition K represented a strong public statement that sex workers deserve the same protection from violence as any other person – and should not have to risk arrest when they report violence to police. Sienna Baskin, of the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, said “Our clients have been arrested, assaulted, and raped by police. Women of color and transgender women in particular are disproportionately targeted for arrest and abuse in the context of the policing of sex work. It is no wonder sex workers often don’t ask police for help when they are victims of crime.” Additionally, prostitution arrests and police harassment and violence against sex workers let others know that if they prey on sex workers, they are unlikely to be apprehended.

Opponents of Proposition K claimed that it would promote trafficking and make it difficult for police to identify trafficked persons. However, the measure would not have stopped enforcement of anti-trafficking laws, and in fact would have mandated that police investigate cases of coercion and extortion involving sex work. The Sex Workers Project has found that enforcement of anti-prostitution laws does not effectively protect trafficked persons, even when police have received specialized training. In fact, enforcement of anti-prostitution laws drives the industry further underground, making it more difficult to assist trafficked persons, and deters trafficked persons from going to the police for fear of being arrested or, in the case of immigrant victims, deported. In places where sex work is not a criminal offense, sex workers feel safer reporting trafficking when they see or experience it.

“We hope that the conversation started by Proposition K will continue across the nation and inform development of sound public policies that recognize and promote the human rights of sex workers,” said Susan Blake of Prostitutes of New York (PONY)

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