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NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY GIVES TRAFFICKING VICTIMS A SECOND CHANCE

Anti-trafficking Advocates Call for Swift Action on Bill in the Senate

NEW YORK CITY (June 16, 2009) – Today the New York State Assembly took a critical step toward enabling victims of human trafficking to wipe away prostitution convictions resulting from coerced involvement in sex work. A.B. 7670, introduced by Assemblymember Gottfried, Chair of the Committee on Health, passed the Assembly unanimously this afternoon. The bill has now been referred to the Senate, where an identical bill introduced by Senator Tom Duane is pending before the Senate Codes Committee.

“In our experience, people trafficked into prostitution are often repeatedly arrested, in some cases up to ten times, in police raids on brothels and other sex work venues, convicted of prostitution, and even sentenced to jail without the police or courts recognizing that they need help,” said Andrea Ritchie, Director of the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center (SWP). “As a result, these trafficking victims often carry with them the burden of a prostitution conviction for conduct they engaged in against their will.”

“Even after they have escaped their abusers, it is extremely hard for people who were trafficked into sex work to start a new life with a long “rap sheet” of prostitution convictions,” added Sienna Baskin, a staff attorney with the SWP who worked with a broad coalition of anti-trafficking advocates to build support for the bill. “Unfortunately, a conviction for prostitution leaves them with significantly fewer options for legal employment, potentially shut out of public housing, vulnerable to eviction from private housing, and at risk of loss of custody of their children. For immigrants, a record of prostitution can be fatal to an application for residency or citizenship. This bill would allow victims of trafficking to clear their records and start fresh.”

“This is really a common sense, humanitarian measure,” Ritchie emphasized. “What victims of trafficking need most is the stability that housing, employment, and legal immigration status provide. They should not suffer ongoing punishment, in the form of the widespread collateral consequences of a prostitution conviction, for acts they committed unwillingly under coercion.”

“Trafficking victims deserve real chance at a safe and stable life once they have escaped their abusers, free of the lifelong stigma and civil consequences of a prior conviction for prostitution,” Baskin said. “We are extremely grateful to Assemblymember Gottfried and Senator Duane for their vision and compassion in introducing this measure on their behalf.”

The bill, the brainchild of Assemblymember Gottfried, has broad support in the Assembly, with more than 30 Assemblymembers signed on as cosponsors or multi-sponsors. It also enjoys broad support in the anti-trafficking movement among service providers and advocates, as well as among the legal profession, law enforcement, and sex workers rights organizations. It is one of several bills whose passage SWP has identified as critical to promoting and protecting the rights of individuals involved in the sex industries, whether by choice, circumstance, or coercion. More information on SWP's legislative agenda is available at <http://www.sexworkersproject.org>.

No vote on the bill's Senate counterpart, S.B. 4429 is currently scheduled, although supporters hope that it will pass before the end of the current legislative session.