

Sacramento Sex Workers Outreach Project
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Senator John Thune
United States Senate SD-511
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Bill Nelson
United States Senate
716 Senate Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Thune, Ranking Member Nelson, and members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation:

For eight and a half years, I was a victim of sex trafficking. That ordeal has formed the way I see the world and has given me firsthand understanding of the horrors of trafficking. Since then, I have dedicated my career to supporting and advocating for my fellow trafficking victims. I founded the Sacramento chapter of Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to upholding the human and civil rights of sex workers, survival sex workers, and trafficking victims. I have spoken nationally on sex trafficking issues and worked with Amnesty International to study the issues surrounding the human and civil rights of sex workers and trafficking victims across the U.S.

Lawmakers must listen to the needs and concerns of sex trafficking victims before passing legislation affecting them. After all, nobody wants to stop sex trafficking more than those who have been victims of this heinous crime. The unintended consequences of bad policy decisions are deadly. It deeply disheartens me to see lobbyists saying they want to help fight trafficking but proposing policies that will do the exact opposite. The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (S. 1693) (“SESTA”) is one such proposal.

SESTA would do nothing to decrease sex trafficking; in fact, it would have the opposite effect. It would impede free speech and punish venues that allow trafficking victims to escape the streets. When trafficking victims are pushed off of online platforms and onto the streets, we become invisible to the outside world as well as to law enforcement, thus putting us in more danger of violence.

I was a victim of similar policy choices to SESTA, when law enforcement increased its targeting of print advertisements for sexual services. As publications stopped running adult ads, we were forced to work on street corners. Those who were trafficked were thus no longer in plain view and were pushed deeper into the shadows, making us more marginalized. Once on the streets, workers are forced into making split-second decisions about the safety of every interaction. In my organization’s 2015 publication *Needs Analysis of Sex Workers in the Sacramento Valley*—which has been cited by sex trafficking researchers and law enforcement agencies across the country—18% of the workers interviewed had migrated to the streets after crackdowns on Internet advertising and 59% reported being raped at least once. We heard stories about those women being held captive in closets and being raped and drugged. All of that happened after they had moved from the Internet to the streets.

In my work with SWOP Sacramento, I have had the opportunity to advocate for many trafficking victims. One example is a woman named Monroe. Monroe was in a car with her trafficker when he instructed her to log on to a site called SF Redbook—a website that had been shut down due to a federal sting. But instead of finding the site, she found a message from the FBI stating the website had been taken down. That evening was the first night she was forced to work on the street.

Since Monroe was new to the street, sexual predators considered her fair game. Her first night out, she was robbed and raped at gunpoint, and when she returned to the hotel room without her money, her pimp beat her. Over the next seven months, she was arrested seven times for loitering with the intent to commit prostitution and once for prostitution, all while she was being trafficked. We approached the FBI for help, but were told that their attorney would not likely prosecute the trafficker. We were mocked and told that we watch too much TV. The case would most likely be kicked down to a local court where her pimp could easily

bail himself out. Today, we are still fighting her last case in court. She is away from her pimp, but her record is marred for life and she has to live with the numerous attacks she suffered on the streets.

To victims of sex trafficking, the idea of shifting liability to publishers for the actions of actual pimps and traffickers is terrifying. Traffickers often kidnap, assault, batter, pander, extort and use fraud to gain control of their victims. Once in control, they utilize techniques designed to retain it, increase profits, and instill loyalty. Those techniques include rape and other forms of sexual abuse, torture, starvation, imprisonment, threats, forced drug addiction, psychological abuse, and coercion. When lobbyists equate the actions of online platforms—which allow free speech and help law enforcement catch our predators—with those of sex traffickers, it shows a deep disrespect for victims and lack of understanding of what we have gone through.

Online posting forums and advertising platforms do not create trafficking and they will not end it.

Publications provide safer venues for us whether we're being trafficked or not. When online options decrease, we must then move to our next best option, and for many, that means taking to the streets. On the streets, the violence increases, as do our arrests. Taking away options for online posting only migrates the problem; it does nothing to end it.

Let me be clear: I have never met a sex trafficking victim that was set free because an online venue disappeared, but have met victims who were made less safe when those venues were shut down. I've met victims who were put on a street corner and moved from city to city, making it harder for them to get help or get away. It makes no difference to a trafficker where his victim works—where it's a street corner, a bar, or an online forum—but it makes a world of difference to the victim herself. Traffickers only care that they get their money, not where they get it from.

Placing more liability on publications or publishers is irresponsible. It demonstrates a deep misunderstanding of the realities of sex trafficking. SESTA is simply lazy lawmaking: passing it would allow politicians to say they are doing something about sex trafficking without having to do the actual work needed to effect change in this area.

If Congress is interested in stopping sex trafficking, then the stakeholders who have worked most closely with trafficking victims must be consulted. There are needs for funding for research into trafficking as well as medical care and programs to allow victims to reintegrate into society. We need to pass Good Samaritan laws allowing trafficking victims to report their traffickers and pimps without being prosecuted themselves. We need to educate our children in how trafficking happens so that they can avoid becoming victims, especially among the marginalized populations that are at the highest risk for being trafficked. SESTA would do none of that. The bill would not help trafficking victims; it would put them in more danger.

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