

Connecticut State Legislative Session 2010

Testimony to the Select Committee on Children

Public Hearing Re: S.B. 153 – An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children

Submitted by Jessica Morneault

Good afternoon to all members of the Select Committee on Children.

Thank you for allowing me to testify before you on Senate Bill Number 153: An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children.

My name is Jessica Morneault and I am currently a graduate student at the UConn School of Social work with a major in Community Organizing. I am here today testifying in support of S.B. 153 with an amendment to change the way the law addresses children under the age of seventeen being sexually exploited through prostitution.

My first full time job after my undergraduate education was with an agency that worked to end commercial sexual exploitation. Within this position, I had the opportunity to work with adult women who had been arrested on charges of prostitution in a supportive group setting. Through the little time I spent with each of these women, sometimes only meeting them once or twice, I can safely say that most of these women were survivors of domestic violence, child sexual abuse, incest, or rape. There were many stories of rape by johns or of being forced to perform certain sexual acts not agreed upon.

This only leads me to imagine the experiences of young girls—children—sexually exploited by older men. If the law in Connecticut states a child under the age of sixteen is unable to consent to sexual activity, how can we safely say that by arresting young girls, and boys, for “prostituting” themselves is *them* committing a crime and not a crime being committed *against* them? How can we blame a child for his or her own sexual abuse by a much older man?

According to Prostitution Research & Education, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on prostitution, pornography, and trafficking, the average age of entry into prostitution is 13 to 14 years. Young girls who are prostituted by men often become involved in the industry simply because of a lack of a safe place to call home. Most come from drug addicted parents, domestic and sexual violence in the home, and worse. Some are even homeless, getting involved with older men who force them into prostitution. And interestingly enough, these young girls rarely, if at all, keep the money or other goods they receive in return for sex. Instead of punishing these children, we must provide them with the services they desperately need to get out of the commercial sex industry and lead healthy, happy lives.

Instead of jail, these young children need positive environments to grow up in that demonstrate healthy relationships and boost their self esteem. A child who grows up believing selling sex is the only way to live needs to be shown, and encouraged to believe, that other opportunities exist with the support of the friends and family they likely never had.

We must begin to also change the language we use from women who “prostitute” themselves to women and young girls and boys who are “prostituted” by the men who solicit them. This bill is a step in the right direction—towards treating young girls and boys who are sexually exploited as victims of a crime committed against them, a crime committed by men who continue to support and promote the real problem—a commercial sex industry that degrades women and children. Let us stop blaming the victim and address the real perpetrators of sexual exploitation while at the same time providing the necessary supports for victims. I strongly urge you all to support revisions of S.B. 153.

Thank you all so much for you time. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.