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## Top US Official on Trafficking Says Lack of Prostitution Law Creates a "Zone of Impunity" for Traffickers

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## Top US Official on Trafficking Says Lack of Prostitution Law Creates a “Zone of Impunity” for Traffickers

Donna M. Hughes\*

The lack of a law against indoor prostitution can create a “zone of impunity in which police can’t go, and where traffickers can exploit their prey,” according to Luis CdeBaca, Ambassador at Large to Combat Human Trafficking and Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons in the U.S. State Department.

Ambassador CdeBaca addressed the problem of decriminalized indoor prostitution in Rhode Island in a speech at a US Department of Education conference in Washington, D.C. (August 3, 2009), and said there is a “need for both a legal and cultural message that does not tolerate prostitution.”

Ambassador CdeBaca is a President Obama appointee to head the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/124083.htm>). Previously he was Counsel to the US House Judiciary Committee for Chairman John Conyers, Jr. where he was centrally involved in negotiating the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act that passed in December 2008. Prior to that he worked at the US Justice Department where he prosecuted forced labor and sex trafficking cases.

Here is his full message about the need for a prostitution law in Rhode Island:

“There is a need for both a legal and a cultural message that does not tolerate prostitution. I was surprised to learn that in Rhode Island ... prostitution is legal so long as it happens indoors, and girls as young as 16 years of age can legally dance in strip clubs. .... It is a legitimate concern that such a hands-off approach towards the so-called “sex industry” can result in a zone of impunity in which police can’t go, and where traffickers can exploit their prey. State legislators are trying to close these prostitution loopholes in Rhode Island, so that the state does not become a magnet for commercial sexual exploitation.”

Throughout his speech, CdeBaca, talks about the importance of combating forced labor as well as sex trafficking in the U.S. and abroad. In 2007, the RI General Assembly passed a law against

human trafficking, but only sex trafficking was included. At the last minute, the wording was changed by the Senate to omit forced labor from the human trafficking law.

There are two different trafficking bills in the General Assembly. The House version of the trafficking bill (H5661A) sponsored by Representative Joanne Giannini includes a provision against forced labor. The Senate version of the trafficking bill (S 605A) again does not ban forced labor.

Please continue to contact Senators and Representatives and tell them that the Ambassador to Combat Human Trafficking has spoken about the need for Rhode Island to have a law against prostitution. And tell them we want a law against forced labor as well.

The entire text of Ambassador CdeBaca's speech is attached.

\*Donna M. Hughes is a resident of Wakefield and co-founder of Citizens Against Trafficking. She is a Professor and holds the Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island.