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June 18, 2009

Testimony in Support of "An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses--Prostitution" at Governors Press Conference, Rhode Island

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Statement by Donna M. Hughes
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Support for H-5044A, An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses—Prostitution and Lewdness

The State Room, Rhode Island State House

June 18, 2009, 1:30 pm

Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of the prostitution bill, H 5044A.

My name is Donna Hughes and I'm a professor and hold the Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island. I have been researching sex trafficking for 20 years. I've published research reports on trafficking in the U.S., Korea, Cambodia, Ukraine and Russia, and a report on how the Internet is used to traffic women and girls in Europe. I have met and worked with dozens of survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking.

My research has repeatedly shown the link between prostitution and sex trafficking. Sex trafficking, a form of modern-day slavery, could not exist without community tolerance for prostitution.

Prostitution is harmful to individuals involved, their families and the community. It is not a victimless activity or just a private sex act. Up to 90% of women in prostitution are beaten and raped by pimps and the men who buy sex. Approximately 90% are addicted to drugs and alcohol. They suffer depression and hopelessness; suicide attempts are common. For visual, physical evidence of the harm caused by prostitution, please look at this collection of serial photographs of prostitutes as they are being destroyed over time by prostitution and drug use.

Because of decriminalized prostitution indoors, the sex industry is expanding rapidly in Rhode Island. Ten new Asian spa-brothels have opened since the beginning of this year. There are 30 documented places in Providence where prostitution is taking place. We know there are many more brothels and clubs throughout the state. Many of them are underground.

From cases throughout the U.S., we know that most of the Asian spa-brothels are connected to Asian organized crime groups. Many of the women in these places do not speak English and don't know they have rights and that protection and services are available. Tolerating these establishments is tolerating organized crime and modern-day slavery.

We know that American women and girls are being victimized in Rhode Island strip-clubs. A service provider from Boston told me recently that pimps—sex traffickers—regularly bring young women and girls to Rhode Island to the clubs. And last week, a missing 16 year old girl from Boston was found bleeding and incoherent and held against her will in a basement in South Providence. She was stripping in a club.

Rhode Island is the only state in the U.S. without a prostitution law. I've spent a lot of time researching the decriminalization of prostitution indoors in Rhode Island from the origin of this

unheard of gap in the law to the ways it impedes investigation and prosecution of sex trafficking cases. I've talked to police officers, prosecutors, U.S. attorneys, FBI agents and officials in the U.S. Department of Justice. Every law enforcement professional I've spoken to has told me that a prostitution law is necessary for effective investigation and prosecution of sex trafficking and pimping cases.

There is an urgent need for a prostitution law in Rhode Island. The status quo is unacceptable. We cannot let these criminals destroy our state and the lives of hundreds of women and girls. My goal is not to punish women, but to give law enforcement the legal tools they need to access victims, and investigate and prosecute cases.