



Ohio Anti-Trafficking Operation Harms Sex Workers

By The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center

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The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center condemns the arrest and detainment of sex workers, including individuals potentially experiencing trafficking, as part of Operation Autumn Hope. The Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost coordinated the operation in partnership with federal, state, and local law enforcement. In a [News Release](#), AG Yost praised the operation as a successful anti-trafficking effort that rescued 109 victims of human trafficking. Concerningly, AG Yost provided few details of the process by which the alleged victims were identified and quotes from the release indicate a clear conflation between sex work and human trafficking.

In a [local newspaper article](#), it is stated that the 109 individuals identified as victims of trafficking were all women who were arrested and detained for questioning as part of the operation. In the article, their incarceration and interrogation were justified as necessary to obtain information on potential traffickers. While SWP is dedicated to ending exploitation and trafficking in all labor sectors, including in the sex trades, we strongly oppose anti-trafficking tactics that include detaining sex workers and people experiencing trafficking. We are also alarmed by the assumption that all the women detained were trafficked despite the lack of clarity provided by AG Yost. We urge the media to not perpetuate the harmful and inaccurate narrative that all sex work occurs due to human trafficking.

Law enforcement's imprisonment of sex workers and trafficked people to address human trafficking causes trauma and harm. Through these practices, the individuals being detained face violations of their human rights as enshrined in international law under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as their civil rights under the US Constitution. It is particularly troubling that during the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement continues to confine sex workers and people experiencing trafficking within jails, increasing individuals' risk of contracting the virus. This encroaches on their individual right to life, liberty and security of person.

We reject the premise by which these operations are carried out, including the conflation of sex work and human trafficking and the justification of detaining and questioning people involved in the sex



trades as necessary to end exploitation. Instead, we urgently recommend the decriminalization of sex work to protect the bodily autonomy and human rights of sex workers and their clients. Decriminalization also creates meaningful and effective avenues for people experiencing trafficking and other forms of exploitation to access trauma-informed support. Through decriminalization, sex workers will no longer fear arrest if reporting abuses that they experience personally or witness in the course of their work, including trafficking. This will benefit efforts to end human trafficking while protecting the rights and respecting the dignity of sex workers.

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