



Sex
Workers
Project



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 3, 2022

Media Inquiries:

The Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center, Zola Z. Bruce, Director of

Communications: zbruce@urbanjustice.org

Reframe Health and Justice, Kate D'Adamo, Partner: Kate@reframehealthandjustice.com

How SEX Workers stay SAFE:

On International Sex Workers Rights Day US Congress Reintroduces Historic Legislation that Centers the Health and Safety of Sex Workers

On March 3, 2022, International Sex Workers Rights Day, Rep. Ro Khanna, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Rep. Barbara Lee and Sen. Ron Wyden make history by re-introducing the SAFE SEX Workers Study Act (SSWSA) with the support of 70 different organizations from anti-violence, public health, technology, and civil and human rights. The SSWSA makes a seemingly straightforward ask of the US government: to study and report on the health and safety consequences of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) on people who trade sex. But the outcomes will be much deeper; if passed, this bill will create a monumental shift in how we understand digital oversight and regulation, anti-trafficking efforts, and sex workers' rights.

As co-chairs of the [Sex Worker Subgroup of the Federal LGBTQPLHIV Criminal Justice Working Group](#) (SWP), the [Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center](#) and [Reframe Health and Justice](#) (RHJ) are thrilled to see this important re-introduction. Our organizations work individually and collectively to support the health and safety of people who trade sex. In carrying out our missions to defend the human rights of sex workers, we also seek to end human trafficking while defending the rights of people disproportionately represented in the sex trades, inclusive of LGBTQ+ and TGNC communities, BIPOC communities, and migrant communities. The SSWSA deepens our collective work by seeking to better understand how people in the sex trades use digital spaces to stay safe and the health and safety implications of losing online platforms since the enactment of SESTA/FOSTA.

"In April of 2018, with the passage of FOSTA/SESTA and the closure of Backpage, sex workers across the globe lost a range of digital platforms and internet spaces used for meeting resource needs, staying safe, accessing community, and organizing for their rights. In the last several years, the community has reported a range of impacts of losing these digital spaces - increased violence and dependence to fear and erasure. The SAFE SEX Worker Study Act is the first bill which asks the government to take a serious look at what happens when marginalized communities are turned into legal liabilities for the spaces they seek to stay safe. As digital regulation becomes an increasingly discussed topic, it is basic due diligence that we understand

these impacts and bring those communities to the table," said **Kate D'Adamo, Partner, Reframe Health and Justice.**

"Through the expertise of our staff and clients, both sex workers and allies, we know firsthand, the devastation caused by SESTA/FOSTA. The harm done by losing access to online platforms was immediate and only made worse by the global COVID-19 pandemic - as we all relied more and more on digital spaces to seek medical information and other services as well as employment. Choosing to engage in consensual sex work as an adult is a human right and laws that do not reflect this undermine people's right to bodily autonomy, freedom of expression, choice of employment, and even life itself. The SAFE SEX Workers Study Act is a critical step to right the wrongs of SESTA/FOSTA by genuinely and rigorously investigating and reporting on the law's impacts on sex workers and people experiencing trafficking in the sex trades," explained **Mariah Grant, Director of Research and Advocacy, the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center.**

The Devastation of SESTA/FOSTA

In one week in 2018, the landscape of sex work radically changed. On April 6, 2018 the Department of Homeland Security seized Backpage.com and charged its owners with money laundering and promotion of prostitution. One week later, Congress passed the bill which would become known as SESTA/FOSTA, which dramatically expanded civil and criminal liability to websites which host information related to commercial sex. The response was swift and devastating—dozens of websites where sex workers found economic stability, screened clients, connected to community and learned harm reduction immediately shut down or began kicking off accounts they profiled as being sex workers.

The impact on the community was catastrophic—the loss of platforms sent many people back to street-based work, where screening clients is harder and violence is more prevalent. Street-based workers saw a flood of people coming to work in person, meaning more competition and fewer opportunities for clients. Some workers reported predatory managers who were offering to find them clients, knowing they were desperate. Violence rose. Housing was lost. People slept in cars. One [mutual aid fund described](#), "Our first wave of requests was, 'Oh my god, rent is due in five days, and now I don't know how to work'... They can no longer find clients to earn what they need to survive."

In the months that followed, community members and community groups [set up mutual aid](#), [conducted research](#) on what was happening, as well as shared stories and tips on how to survive financially. In the wake of devastation (which targeted sex workers), it was the sex working community which came together.

In the years since, many more bills have been introduced which have targeted digital platforms in a myriad of ways. Some bills, like the EARN IT Act, look to use the same tactics as SESTA/FOSTA and expand this disastrous law's impact to more platforms and communities. Others have taken different approaches to address other issues, such as asking platforms to regulate how [app stores prioritize results](#). But [what remains lacking](#) in any of these attempts is an effort to rigorously assess the impact of the last attempt at digital reform: SESTA/FOSTA.



Sex
Workers
Project



The SAFE SEX Workers Study Act

The legislation being introduced today in Congress attempts to close a gap in knowledge that is fostering bad policy and causing negligent harm. It is a common sense bill which would allow Congress to rely on evidence and not assumptions in its efforts to regulate digital spaces.

The SAFE SEX Workers Study Act asks the Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a robust, nationwide study on the impact of losing access to digital platforms for sex workers. This is the first bill in Congress recognizing that sex workers deserve health and safety, and asks for more information on how our policy decisions, including our approach to anti-trafficking efforts, have impacted the community. Pulling directly from real experiences that sex workers reported, the study looks to answer some of the questions that sex workers have been demanding be researched; this includes, the health and safety implications of being able to negotiate with clients, experiences of violence, and effects of relying on third parties.

The Sex Workers Project, Reframe Health and Justice, and many of the organizations supporting the bill include sex workers within their leadership. We know from lived experience how critical the SAFE SEX Workers Study Act is to public health and the wellbeing of people who trade sex. We urge congress to pass this historic and critically needed legislation.