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Partially decriminalizing prostitution in Maine faces new backlash ahead of vote

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AUGUSTA, Maine — A renewed push to partially decriminalize prostitution in Maine while increasing penalties in certain cases for buyers of sex is facing what its sponsor called “disinformation” ahead of a key Senate vote slated for this week.

The House [gave initial approval last month](#) to a measure from Rep. Lois Reckitt, D-South Portland, that would eliminate the crime of engaging in prostitution. Buying sex would remain illegal with increased penalties for those who solicit sex from minors or people with mental disabilities.

The Senate could vote on the measure as soon as Tuesday. But the effort is already facing pushback from left-leaning groups that want it to also include decriminalization for buyers of sex and from conservatives uncomfortable with allowing prostitution in any form. The latter argument was echoed by Gov. Janet Mills when she vetoed a similar bill in 2021.

Engaging in prostitution is a [Class E misdemeanor in Maine](#), punishable by up to six months in jail



felony.

Mills, a Democrat, [wrote](#) that she feared sex traffickers would use decriminalization to “entice more people into their trade” when she vetoed Reckitt’s last bill two years ago. Mills’ office did not respond to a request for comment Monday about this year’s proposal, although the Maine State Police [opposed it in testimony](#) earlier this year.

But seven House Republicans, including House Minority Leader Billy Bob Faulkingham of Winter Harbor, joined Democrats to [support the bill in an 86-57 vote](#) in May. Reckitt noted Hawaii adopted the “partial decriminalization” strategy after she tried to make Maine the first state to do so in 2021, with Massachusetts and New York now considering similar bills.

In [written testimony](#) submitted in April to the Judiciary Committee, Reckitt recalled hearing the stories of young prostitutes in the 1980s while executive vice president of the National Organization for Women and wanting to help those who have been “trafficked, trapped or in the depths of despair.”

Reckitt said while accurate numbers are often hard to find due to underreporting, prostitution is present in Maine, as evidenced by stings in [South Portland](#) and [Lewiston](#) in recent years. She also highlighted existing work done by a 10-week diversion program that seeks to help men who were “first-time sex buyers” in Androscoggin and Cumberland counties.

“If we end the demand of something, then the supply is no longer needed,” [Tricia Grant](#), who helps run the diversion groups and survived being trafficked starting at age 15, said in an interview.

Reckitt added countries like France have enacted similar partial decriminalization policies and seen sharp drops in prostitution while also [helping former prostitutes find stable employment](#) elsewhere after quitting.

But the pros and cons of decriminalizing prostitution [are often disputed both nationally and internationally](#). Senate Minority Leader Trey Stewart, R-Presque Isle, is preparing an amendment that would water down Reckitt’s bill by keeping prostitution illegal for those who engage it in voluntarily, a spokesperson said.

“Our laws should reflect that we want to protect those most vulnerable, and target pimps and those who take advantage of those being coerced into the work without becoming the Wild West  for voluntary prostitution,” Stewart said in a statement.

decriminalization" can [lead to more attacks on sex workers](#) and no reduction in trafficking. Opponents argue it should also decriminalize the purchasing of sex.

[Decriminalize Sex Work](#), a national group focused on improving "public attitudes toward sex work," said a [poll of 538 Maine registered voters](#) conducted by [Public Policy Polling](#) in May found 12 percent support Reckitt's bill while 55 percent oppose it and 33 percent were "unsure."

The survey asked: "Some people are proposing a law which would make it legal for adults to SELL sexual services, but illegal for adults to BUY sexual services. Do you support or oppose this proposed law?"

"When sex work and trafficking are conflated, law enforcement and other state resources are misappropriated," Rebecca Cleary, staff lawyer at Decriminalize Sex Work, added in a Monday news release. "Money and time is used to prosecute any prostitution-related crimes, limiting resources that could be otherwise fully focused on trafficking investigations."

Still, Reckitt said left-leaning groups like the Maine Women's Lobby, which she co-founded in the 1970s, have been "spreading disinformation" about what her bill would and would not do.

Reckitt said she has worked on her bill with eight survivors who worked in prostitution before escaping trafficking. Survivors also testified to lawmakers on a [companion bill](#) from Reckitt that would seal the criminal histories of people who previously engaged in prostitution.

"I have pledged to these survivors that before I step down, I will try to make sure I find every place in state government where they could be helped under current law," said Reckitt, who is in her fourth consecutive term in the House and can't run again due to term limits. "I feel we have a societal responsibility to help these women make their lives whole again."

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