Dear Member of Congress:

We, the undersigned, support the “SESTA and FOSTA Examination of Secondary Effects for Sex Workers Study Act or the SAFE SEX Workers Study Act”, to study the impact of losing access to internet platforms on the health and safety of sex workers. As organizations working across diverse communities, we are committed to meaningfully improving the health, safety and wellness for people who trade sex. Whether a personal choice or a necessity, sex work is work. But systemic discrimination can lead LGBTQ people in particular to sex work. In a 2015 survey of transgender people, 19% reported doing some type of sex work for food, money, or a place to sleep. In a 2011 survey of transgender people, of those engaged in sex work, 69% had experienced a negative job outcome such as being fired or denied a job because of being transgender, nearly half (48%) had experienced homelessness, and nearly a third (31%) lived on less than $10,000 a year. Transgender people engage in sex work at a rate ten times that of cisgender women.

Further, criminalization, discrimination by service-providers, and stigma make people who trade sex more vulnerable to violence, victimization and exploitation. One study of New York sex workers reported that 80% had been victims of violence, including 27% at the hands of police. Twenty-three percent of LGBTQ murder victims on the 2012 Anti-Violence Project report were killed while engaging in sex work. Sex workers report being extorted and sexually exploited by police officers. Transgender women across the country, particularly transgender women of color, report police profiling them as sex workers even when they are engaged in activity such as gathering with friends in a public space or walking down the street.

Many people who trade sex rely on access to internet platforms for safety and security, and to enable harm reduction techniques. Sex workers and direct-service providers anecdotally know that access to internet platforms improves the health and safety of sex workers. One study, currently under peer review, demonstrated a correlation between the creation of online venues for people who trade sex through Craigslist’s adult services section and a drop of 17% of female homicides. However, in the last several years, numerous platforms have either been seized by federal law enforcement such as Rentboy.com, or shut down due to increased and vague criminal and civil liability due to the passage of FOSTA/SESTA. Community organizations and direct-service providers for sex-workers around the world have anecdotally reported a widespread destabilization of sex-worker communities.

The loss of access to internet platforms, the venues through which sex workers have been able to make ends meet, has pushed many sex workers who were previously independent into other street-based work, working for managers, and with third parties. This can lead to a decrease in income, which many sex workers have indeed reported. This has, in turn, led sex workers to work with more clients in order to make up lost income, including those clients who have previously been black-listed for theft and violence.

While sex workers and advocates have widespread anecdotal information about the consequences of losing access to internet platforms, no rigorous study has been conducted to
assess the full impact of the loss of internet platforms for the health and safety of sex workers, who are frequently amongst the most marginalized members of our society.

This bill directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to conduct a study to assess the unintended impacts of losing access to internet platforms on people who trade sex and their communities. As anti-trafficking policies and practices are carried out, policymakers must consider the collateral consequences and ask whether current policies and practices are the most effective way to achieve the important goal of reducing exploitation and trafficking. This study will focus on those who are most impacted by the loss of access to internet platforms, people who have been trading sex both before and after the closure of these platforms, and recognize that these community members should not be made more precarious and vulnerable to violence and exploitation as a result of anti-trafficking policies and law enforcement actions.

In developing anti-trafficking policies, the impact of those policies on people who consensually trade sex is frequently not a consideration. Because many people choose sex work when their options are limited by systemic discrimination, it is important that anti-trafficking policies be designed to avoid further harming or stigmatizing sex workers. Policies and practices must be effective in reaching their intended goal and must weigh the collateral consequences of their enactment. This study would be one of the first rigorous, national study to evaluate the impacts of policies intended to prevent trafficking on people engaged in consensual, transactional sex work. We invite you to support the health and safety of people who trade sex by better understanding the unintended impacts of anti-trafficking policies by being an original co-sponsor of this landmark legislation.

Sincerely,

ABC Atlanta LLC
Advocates for Youth
Advocating Opportunity
AIDS Alabama
AIDS Foundation of Chicago
AIDS United
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union
Athlete Ally
Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition
BiNet USA
Black and Pink
Black and Pink, Boston Chapter
CARES
Center for Constitutional Rights
Center for HIV Law and Policy
Center for Sexual Pleasure and Health
Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School
Charm City Care Connection
Collective Action for Safe Spaces
Counter Narrative Project
DecrimNY
Determine Your Destiny
Drug Policy Alliance
Equality North Carolina
Families For Justice As Healing
FORGE, Inc.
Free Speech Coalition (FSC)
GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality
Harm Reduction Coalition
HIPS
HIVenas Abiertas: A Network of Latinx People Living with HIV
Human Rights Campaign
LaGender Inc
Lambda Legal
Massachusetts Bail Fund
Mazzoni Center
The Moore-O’Neal Law Group, LLC
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Center for Lesbian Rights
The National Equality Action Team
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
No Justice No Pride
Oasis Legal Services
Peer Wellness & Recovery Services, Inc.
Positive Women’s Network - USA
Positively Trans
Promundo-US
Rad Care
Red Canary Song
Reframe Health and Justice
San Francisco AIDS Foundation
Sero Project
Sex Workers Outreach Project, USA
Sex Workers Outreach Project, Baltimore Chapter
Sex Workers Outreach Project, Behind Bars
Sex Workers Outreach Project, Sacramento Chapter
SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change
Sister’s Unchained
St. James Infirmary
Support Ho(s)e
Transcending Barriers
Transgender Law Center
Treatment Action Group (TAG)
URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity
Vera Institute of Justice
Voices of Hope
Whitman-Walker Health
Whose Corner is it Anyway
Woodhull Freedom Foundation