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Newsroom

Student's Long Crusade Helps End Prostitution in Rhode Island

BRISTOL, R.I., Nov. 3, 2009 - When Rhode Island Governor Donald A. Carcieri signed a bill today outlawing indoor prostitution in Rhode Island, the first-year law student whose efforts were instrumental in securing the law's passage was on hand by special invitation.

Melanie Shapiro, 22, a current student at Roger Williams University School of Law who co-founded and co-directs [Citizens Against Trafficking](#), has been confronting the issue of indoor prostitution in Rhode Island for years. Working together with Professor Donna Hughes of the University of Rhode Island, she played a key role in getting the issue front-and-center before the state legislature and urging its passage into law.

Shapiro's numerous penetrating and detailed reports on the issues circulated widely among law enforcement personnel and members of the Rhode Island General Assembly prior to the historic vote. Most of these reports are available on the Citizens Against Trafficking website; one of the more comprehensive, titled "Sex Trafficking and Decriminalized Prostitution Indoors in Rhode Island," can be [read online](#).

"When you legalize something, you legitimize it," Shapiro says. "And I could never stand behind legitimizing something so inherently dangerous to women and children. Rhode Island was part of an international legislative debate about prostitution. The whole world was watching. This change here will have policy implications throughout the world for countries like India, which were on the verge of decriminalization."

Shapiro's strong opinions and hands-on, confrontational approach to the issue have often put her into the line of fire, and she has a dramatic story to tell. "I have experienced a lot of backlash and direct confrontation with pimps, madams, managers and other perpetrators; as well as verbal and print attacks from the opposition," she notes.

The Rhode Island bill's sponsors, Rep. Joanne M. Giannini, D-Providence, and Sen. Paul V. Jabour, D-Providence, have publicly acknowledged Shapiro's positive influence on the bill's passage. Her report and many other writings on the topic have circulated within the FBI, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and many other organizations. She has been widely quoted by news organizations including

the Providence Journal, the National Review and the Associated Press, has appeared on local radio television networks, and been interviewed for background by such publications as the Wall Street Journal.