

February 19, 2013

The Honorable Mayor Reed, Councilman Michael Julian Bond, and The Atlanta City Council:

We represent a growing number of LGBTQI organizations, community leaders and concerned residents expressing our deep opposition to the proposed Banishment Ordinance currently being debated in City Council. We are concerned for all of our LGBTQI community members, many of whom have turned to prostitution and sex work in order to meet basic needs. We oppose this ordinance because we believe it is a discriminatory and ill-conceived public policy that sets us back, endangers our health as a community, and worsens the problem it seeks to address.

This ordinance is rooted in homophobia, transphobia and racism.

The Trans community is already deeply marginalized in the City of Atlanta. We face routine discrimination, we have been shut out of housing and employment opportunities, and we are routinely harassed, profiled and jailed regardless of whether we are engaging in illegal activities or not. We fall prey to a myriad of allegations that are baseless simply because we are viewed as 'different.' It is as a result of lifelong discrimination that we are forced into underground economies and are subject to the most egregious forms of violence, bullying and marginalization. By and large, engaging in sex work is an act of survival, not of choice.

This is a public health issue not a criminal justice issue.

Banishment and harsher penalties will not prevent sex workers from engaging in sex commerce. It will only relocate and redistribute them where they will engage in the same high risk practice in other areas. Banishment squanders valuable opportunities to provide much needed interventions and services for those forced to engage in sex commerce. Substance use and mental health challenges may persist unaddressed.

Imposed relocation and/or jail time can have dire and unforeseen consequences. It will exacerbate key vulnerabilities and pre-existing health conditions, and have a grossly negative impact on our community at large. For example, the HIV prevalence rate is relatively high among individuals who exchange sex for resources. Displacing them limits their ability to get tested and linked to services. This is a public health issue that we should all be concerned with.

Study after study has proven that increased criminalization of sex work exacerbates the problem instead of solving it. Police, increased jail time and harsh punishment are not the answer. More and more elected officials have realized that downsizing our prison and jail system is better, safer and more cost effective for our state, so why are Atlanta City leaders trying to reverse course?

We know that to succeed, people need opportunities, support and options, not jail time and banishment. Let's put our energy into finding real solutions that allow all people a way to make a livable wage and support themselves and their families. We ask that you stop this ordinance in its tracks and start over - this time, including the stakeholders who have the experience and expertise to actually address the problems.

Sincerely,

Georgia Equality
JustUSATL
LaGender, Inc.

Social Justice Guild, First Existentialist Congregation
Trans(forming)
TILLT (Trans Individuals Living Their Truth)
ZAMI NOBLA

BT
SuAn Bates
Xochitl Bervera
Letitia M. Campbell
Dee Dee Chamblee
Cheryl Courtney-Evans
Lorraine Fontana
Deepali Gokhale
Kathryn Hamoudah
Amir Jones
Kung Li
Moki Macias
Jodie Helen Martin
Evelyn Lynn
Glo Ross
Everette Thompson
Craig Washington