

# ***WOMEN'S ENEWS***

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## **Berkeley Debates Decriminalizing Prostitution**

**By Kristin Bender, WeNews correspondent**

BERKELEY, Calif. (WOMENSENEWS) – A former high-end call girl is lobbying voters to approve a measure to decriminalize prostitution in this university city of liberals and intellectuals. And the controversial idea is already raising many eyebrows among the highbrows.

The measure wouldn't make sex-for-hire legal in Berkeley. Rather, it would direct the police department to make prostitution the city's lowest criminal priority along with marijuana arrests.

"We are trying to show California that we have support in the Bay Area," said Robyn Few, the former prostitute who spearheaded the measure on the Nov. 2 ballot. "We want to show the state that Berkeley believes that prostitution should be decriminalized to save the lives of women and to end discrimination against women."

Few, 45, and the backers of "Angel's Initiative," named after a prostitute who was murdered in San Francisco in 1993, say decriminalizing the world's oldest profession would alleviate violence against women, improve public health for prostitutes who are too afraid or too embarrassed to go to a doctor, help prostitutes transition out of street work and encourage statewide reform.

An estimated 2,000 prostitutes are murdered in the United States every year. Homicide is the number one cause of death among street-walkers, experts say. They are also vulnerable targets for rape and robbery. Angel's Initiative will mean "equal protection under the law and safe streets for everyone," backers of the measure say.

"When the fear of repression is lifted, women can negotiate for themselves," said Few, the founder of the Sex Workers Outreach Project.

If the measure is approved by voters, Berkeley would be the first city in the nation to decriminalize prostitution. (A few counties in Nevada have legalized the sex trade.)

The city would be mandated to redirect at least some of the \$1 million it spends annually on prostitution enforcement to social services for prostitutes. The law would also direct the city council to lobby state leaders in favor of repealing current prostitution laws.

Still, the bold step would be purely symbolic because police must follow state law, which outlaws sex for sale. Cops would just look the other way.

The measure, which needs a simple majority to pass at the polls, has already seen a slew of organized opposition from city leaders and community activists. The city council voiced their opposition in July, and clergy, former state leaders, school board members, psychologists and prostitution researchers have come out against it.

“There would be no legal sanctions,” said Melissa Farley, a psychologist and researcher in San Francisco. “A pimp would become a businessman, just like any other businessman, except that he would be selling people and prostitution and johns would be purchasing people.”

Opponents say street prostitution is “nothing to celebrate,” and call the measure a simplistic approach to a complicated and complex problem. They argue that the measure does nothing more than ask police and community leaders to look the other way. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” won’t solve anything, they claim.

These foes say shelter workers and drug counselors already report girls as young as 12 entering into the trade sex. Decriminalization will just increase the chances of child prostitutes, they say.

“The majority of women who have been trapped” in prostitution “are victims of molestation, rape and violence,” said Alesia Adams, from the Center for End Adolescent Sexual Exploitation in Atlanta. If prostitution is decriminalized in Berkeley, it would “open the floodgates” to more young women being led into becoming sex workers, she says.

### Police Claim Measure Will Add More Problems

The Berkeley police are also against decriminalization of the sex trade. Berkeley’s lower-income areas will see increased crime and possibly more assaults, thefts, robberies and batteries, said police spokesperson Officer Joe Okies.

He said that decriminalizing will lead to increased traffic in some of the lower income areas of the city and that johns and pimps from all over, including San Francisco, will come to Berkeley looking to buy sex and make money.

In addition, officers will be forced to use valuable street time responding to complaints of open sex acts near schools and parks and complaints of needles and discarded condoms in neighborhoods, police argue. Last year, police logged nearly 300 calls for service related to prostitution. That number is likely to soar under decriminalization.

Although she has strong opposition, Few has many supporters as well. Carol Leigh, a spokesperson for COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), a San Francisco-based sex

workers rights organization, said decriminalization would improve relationships with police and prostitutes and advance health care.

“Generally, there is a distrust of the police among prostitutes. If you are raped, you don’t go to the police,” said Leigh, a former prostitute.

COYOTE supports the removal of discriminatory laws as a civil rights issue, said Margo St. James, who founded the group more than 30 years ago.

“Criminalization makes it impossible to attain workers’ rights (as the workplaces are illegal) and keeps the business underground,” St. James said.

Other backers argue that decriminalize will allow prostitutes to openly visit doctors for annual pelvic exams and get regular tests for sexually transmitted diseases. They will be more likely to seek out mental health care.

“If prostitution is not criminalized, prostitutes can talk to their doctors. When they have problems, they can share ways to protect themselves,” Leigh said.

When prostitutes organize meetings – to talk about threatening johns or “dirty tricks,” as they are called – most are too afraid to attend.

“There’s always some sort of rumor that the police have infiltrated the meetings,” Leigh said.

#### ‘Education not Incarceration’

Backers also claim that “education not incarceration” will be possible under the measure. Prostitutes will be more likely to seek job training while they continue to work the streets if they aren’t fearful of being locked up. Criminal records, they say, make getting off the streets very tough.

“Almost every prostitute wants to quit. It is a transitional job and most of us are looking toward something else. But in the meantime, some of us view this as the best option,” said Leigh, one of the authors of the measure.

While nobody argues that prostitutes need job training emergency housing, drug and alcohol treatment and medical services, proponents want sex workers to have the option to be up front about their profession while getting basic social services.

“We need social service programs to help prostitutes. But why can’t we have the programs before women get arrested?” Few said. “What I believe we need is a provider who says these are the services we have and this is what’s available to you.”

While agreeing with Few that sex workers need social services, Farley and others worry the measure will mainstream prostitution for women who are already among the most

vulnerable – those battling drug and alcohol addictions, homelessness, previous sexual assault, racism and poverty.

“I plan to continue to educate people about the real needs of the women involved in the sex trade,” Farley said. “They tell me they need medical treatment in the form of drug and alcohol treatment. Nobody can turn 10 tricks a night without getting high or disassociating. They do develop drug and alcohol problems and more often than not, people become addicted to cope with the trauma.”

Kristin Bender is a journalist based in Oakland, Calif.

For more information:

Sex Workers Outreach Project: <http://www.swop-usa.org/>

Prostitution Research and Education: <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com>

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