Mr. Chairman and Members of this Distinguished Committee:

My name is Joe Huang-Racalto, I am the Director of Government Relations and Public Policy for ECPAT-USA, a children’s rights organization working to protect every child’s right to grow up free from sexual exploitation. ECPAT-USA opposes not only City Council bill 23-0318, but any attempt to decriminalize pimping, sex buying and brothel owning wherever they are introduced. Laws like these are harmful to children. Before joining ECPAT, I worked for two decades fighting for and defending civil rights for LGBTQ Americans -- first as a Senior Policy Advisor, and then as a Chief of Staff, in the United States House of Representatives. As a gay man myself, who is dedicated to stopping the exploitation and trafficking of children, the passage of this bill will set back our efforts to protect all children by decades.

Children who are most at risk for recruitment by traffickers are largely those who are from backgrounds of abuse and neglect, children from foster care, LGBTQ children and runaway and homeless children. Our LGBTQ children face exceptional risks when they decide to come out or are forcibly outed. Those risks often include isolation and homelessness, two conditions which make them especially vulnerable to traffickers.

LGBTQ children are affected by sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in larger percentages than their straight counterparts. In a ten-city study of sexually exploited youth by Covenant House, LGBTQ youth accounted for only 19% of the respondents interviewed, but they accounted for 36% of the sex trafficking victims. ¹ According to the U.S. National Coalition For Homelessness, only 20 percent of homeless youth are LGBT in the United States, but 58.7 percent of them are exploited in the sex trade. ² The Center for American Progress reported that young men who have sex with men (gay or bisexual youth) are more likely to be forced into prostitution than any other youth population. ³

It is well documented that children, as young as 12, are integrated into the adult sex trade and sold on the same websites and in the same neighborhoods, even though it is currently illegal. Declaring

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¹ Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten-City Study Executive Summary, 2014-2016
² Sex Trafficking of LGBT Individuals - A Call for Service Provision, Research, and Action, 2013
³ Seeking Shelter: The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth, September 2013
that children will be protected under the bill is just not credible. With the passage of this law, if there isn’t enough supply, pimps and traffickers will go to extreme lengths to recruit vulnerable children to meet the demand.

Continued.....

While the bill may be well-intentioned, the impact on LGBT and all youth will be devastating. Instead of this misguided bill, the City Council should focus on providing a safe and protective environment for our children, with supportive housing, education support, job training, accessible health care and counseling. The passage of this bill will not do any of these things, it will only make it more likely and easier for children to be bought and sold in the sex trade.

If even one child is trafficked or exploited because of passage of this legislation, then this Committee will have to be held accountable.

As a soon-to-be parent myself, I call on you to help create a safe and supportive city for all our children and youth and turn away from this misguided attempt and focus on real solutions for protecting children from sexual exploitation.

Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, I urge you to reject this legislation.

Thank you.