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## ***After START Act Passes NYS Legislature, Legal Aid Calls on Cuomo to Immediately Enact This Critical Bill for Survivors of Human Trafficking***

(NEW YORK, NY) - The Legal Aid Society issued the following statement in response to the New York State Legislature passing the Survivors of Trafficking Attaining Relief Together (START) Act, S.674 (Ramos)/A.459 (Gottfried), a life-changing bill that would help survivors of labor and sex trafficking overcome previously insurmountable barriers to stability and safety caused by criminal convictions that resulted from their victimization:

“We have seen first-hand how transformative vacatur has been for survivors who were able to obtain long sought-after employment, housing, and immigration documentation once their prostitution convictions were cleared. Our clients consistently tell us that vacatur heals some of the emotional wounds inflicted upon them by their traffickers, allowing them to move beyond their victimization and get a fresh start. Our advocacy has been hindered, however, by the law’s limitation of relief to human trafficking victims with *prostitution* convictions. Today, the Senate has joined the Assembly in acknowledging that the time has come for New York State to provide stronger protections for **all** human trafficking survivors with criminal records resulting from conduct that they were forced to engage in.

The Legal Aid Society urges the Governor to listen to the words of our clients and to sign this legislation immediately.”

JS, a client of the Legal Aid Society’s **Exploitation Intervention Project** stated: “Those like myself who have experienced trauma and its aftermath will now be able to have a second chance at life without discrimination and the backlash stemming from their tragedy. I am currently

enrolled in college and have a great job assisting New Yorkers get access to the COVID-19 vaccine and vital PPE. I am trying to give back as much as possible, but I know moving forward my convictions would stand in my way. This legislation would open many doors for me.”

Ricky, another client of the **Exploitation Intervention Project** reflected on the legislation’s passage, “This day to me truly means a new beginning and a brighter future, a future that was once unimaginable, with no limitations or barriers that were once imposed on me. The worry and anxiousness, the constant reminder of what I had been exposed to, how I had been treated, what I was forced to do, will not be present in my mind when I apply for higher education, a new career path, new opportunities, or even a new place to live. Like an eagle that must shed its beak, talons, and feathers in order to grow new ones and fly higher, this vote has allowed the remnants of the past to be removed from me in order to allow me to soar and truly fly higher. I thank the New York Senate for its vote, which has truly set me free – it will be the air and wind beneath my new wings.”

## **Background**

The START Act would:

- Allow survivors the opportunity to petition a court to clear convictions for all offenses that were a result of being trafficked;
- Empower judges to evaluate evidence and decide whether relief is appropriate;
- Extend relief to survivors of labor trafficking and offer critical protections to immigrant survivors;
- Ensure survivors’ information is kept confidential.

The START Act would not change current prostitution or human trafficking laws or impact open criminal cases or convictions.

The START Act has garnered widespread support including from groups that advocate for racial justice, gender justice, immigrant justice, survivors of violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and civil rights.

Since 2010, The Legal Aid Society has filed nearly 190 vacatur motions for 120 trafficking survivors whose *prostitution*-related convictions were a direct result of their victimization. These clients have benefitted in countless emotional and tangible ways from having these convictions vacated.

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*The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For 145 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. [www.legalaidnyc.org](http://www.legalaidnyc.org)*