

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY

Justice in Every Borough.

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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Statement on Governor Hochul Signing the START Act into Law

(NEW YORK, NY) - Tina Luongo, Attorney-In-Charge of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society, released the following statement in response to Governor Kathy Hochul signing the Survivors of Trafficking Attaining Relief Together (START) Act (S.674/A.459) into law, life-changing legislation that will help survivors of labor and sex trafficking clear or vacate all criminal convictions that resulted from their victimization:

“The Legal Aid Society applauds the historic significance of the START Act and lauds Governor Hochul, Senator Ramos, and Assembly Member Gottfried for seeing this critical legislation into law. We also wish to recognize the determination and strength of survivors who have fought tirelessly for this legislation.

The START Act remedies the shortcomings of the current law, which limited eligibility for vacatur to prostitution convictions, ignoring the reality that human trafficking survivors are forced by their traffickers to commit a variety of offenses.

Trafficking survivors will now be able to vacate or clear all criminal convictions that are a result of their exploitation. These criminal records are lifelong traumatic reminders of abuse which hinder emotional, psychological, and financial healing. The Act sends a clear message that New York stands with all criminalized trafficking victims - whether exploited into commercial sex or other labor sectors.

We hope that Albany will build on this success in the coming session by enacting Clean Slate (S1553A/A6399), similar legislation that would automatically clear a New Yorker's criminal record once they become eligible.”

J.S., a client of The Legal Aid Society, said, “When I apply for jobs, I am judged by what is on paper - a felony conviction - and not by who I am and what I have achieved since then. It is a very big blemish. This legislation will allow my lawyer and I to try to remove this conviction from my record so that employers look at my strengths. This is tremendous. I am very excited about the doors that will now be open for me and for others like me who have been held back by trafficking related convictions.”

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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