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Future Uncertain for Child Sex Bill

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Aug 13, 2010

State Senator Renee Unterman of Buford already has the distinction of being the only female Republican in a male-dominated Senate, but she really became a standout during the last legislative session when she introduced a bill that asserted that young prostitutes in Georgia should be deemed victims, not criminals.

In fact, she set off a firestorm of controversy with **SB304**, which declared that boys and girls under the age of 16 shouldn't be charged with prostitution, but instead diverted to treatment or therapy. Child welfare advocates championed the move as a step in the right direction for sexually exploited young people in Georgia. Opponents, however, accused Unterman, of attempting to "decriminalize" prostitution. The age of sexual consent in Georgia only seemed to complicate the issue further. Sen. Unterman spoke to JJIE's **Chandra R. Thomas** about the latest on the controversial measure.

Let's begin with a recap of what happened with your bill.

The bill died because it did not get a hearing before the judiciary committee. So, the bill is dead. I've got to start all over in January with a new bill. I have not made up my mind if I will reintroduce it.

Any other updates to share on it?

I didn't have much success on the state level but I am making some headway on the national front. I recently got a similar, larger measure passed regarding a variety of sex crimes at the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#). It includes a lot of things like human trafficking, forced slavery and the sexual exploitation of children. It went through for all of the 50 states. It's the first time a national policy got adopted by elected officials in the state legislature nationwide. It took me a year to do it.

What does this nationwide measure entail?

It's a policy that can be adopted into law by the legislators in their individual states. They can change it up to address specific needs in their state, so it's essentially a template that lawmakers can use to strengthen laws addressing human trafficking.

You faced a lot of opposition for your state bill, what was that like?

When it was introduced, that particular bill had a lot of opposition from the religious right. My contention was that a child under the age of 16 [who is selling sex] is a victim, not a criminal, who needs treatment. The Christian conservatives feel that they should be locked up.

What was your response?

I tried to change it (the bill) so that the conservatives would like it, but it never got a hearing. Unfortunately our juvenile code is so complicated. The juvenile code is so messed up in Georgia. It's being rewritten right now. One of the main issues of contention is when is a child a victim and when is a



child a criminal?

What do you think?

I believe that when a child is 12 or 13 years old, that the rest of their life should not be ruined if they end up in jail. If so, they should be sent to a juvenile detention center where their record can be expunged when they're older.

What kind of positive reaction did you receive regarding the bill?

It's been very positive. In a couple of weeks Fox News in D.C. will be taping an interview here for a documentary featuring my bill. *The Washington Post* has written a story on [the bill]. It is really bringing the issue to the forefront for Americans.

What inspired you to write the bill?

I had a preacher to come and see me in Atlanta. He told me what was happening. He said just down the street from the state capitol this was going on. He said children were getting off the bus at the Greyhound station and literally getting picked up by pimps. I wanted to do something about it.

Do you agree that the fact that 16 is the age of sexual consent in Georgia only seems to complicate this matter further?

Yes. It is state law that a child under the age of 16 cannot consent to sex. It's just a very difficult issue here in Georgia due to our Juvenile Code. It's very complicated.

What do you plan to do moving forward?

I haven't started deciding yet if it will be reintroduced. Even if I don't get something passed it raises awareness. This is a really important here in Georgia because Atlanta is a known hub for child prostitution.

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