

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 0138: Education - Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program - Human and Sex Trafficking

Submitted by:

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Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 0138. My name is Ashley McAree and I am a forensic nurse with Greater Baltimore Medical Center's SAFE Program. Within this role, I provide direct care to patients who have been affected by violence and abuse, specifically sexual assault, domestic violence, child physical and sexual abuse, and human trafficking. I also co-chair the Baltimore County Human Trafficking Work Group and work alongside a strong multi-disciplinary team to combat this crime in our community.

Children are being exploited for labor and sold for sex every single day in our state. I frequently witness the debilitating effects of human trafficking victimization first-hand. I have cared for victims of human sex trafficking as young as 10 years old. Traffickers target those who are most vulnerable and easily manipulated. Children are frequently victimized due to their vulnerabilities. Many children are targeted, groomed, and exploited before they even know what is happening. This type of crime can have devastating, life-long effects on young victims.

Anti-trafficking professionals work tirelessly in our reactive approach, caring for those who have already been viciously victimized. In addition to our reactive response, we must also focus on a proactive response to stop this crime from occurring in the first place. Raising awareness and providing education to those high-risk individuals is key to decreasing human trafficking in our communities. We must arm at-risk individuals with the knowledge necessary to identify recruitment, grooming, and signs of human trafficking before the exploitation begins. We must also provide information about the lifesaving resources that are available to the public.

Over the past few years, I have strived to improve our response to human trafficking patients by developing policies, protocols, and trainings. I have personally trained over 3,000 individuals on the human trafficking crisis in our community and have seen first-hand the positive outcomes that can result from even a brief educational offering. I believe that age-appropriate human trafficking education for grades 6 through 8 would prove to be effective at increasing awareness about this crime and decreasing the rate of youth victimization. It is recommended that the proposed curriculum be evidence-based, align with national best practices for human trafficking education, include survivor input, and be developed by human trafficking experts.

For these reasons, I urge you to support House Bill 0138. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide written testimony and for your consideration.