



BILL NO: House Bill 138
TITLE: Education – Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program – Human and Sex Trafficking
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
HEARING DATE: February 3, 2021
POSITION: SUPPORT

The Amara Legal Center writes to support House Bill 138 (HB138). We are grateful that Delegate Johnson introduced this important legislation to address human trafficking education for youth in grades six through eight. We believe that this bill is a step in the right direction to assist youth in identifying and avoiding trafficking situations. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our thoughts.

The Amara Legal Center (“Amara”) provides free legal services in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia to anyone whose rights are violated while involved in commercial sex, most commonly our clients are sex trafficking survivors. Since 2013, Amara has served over 500 clients. Although many believe that sex trafficking only occurs overseas or among foreign nationals, the vast majority of Amara’s clients are U.S. citizens, both juveniles and adults born and raised in the D.C. metro area. Amara provides brief legal advice, partial and full representation for civil legal issues such as civil protection orders, divorce, child custody and support, and name changes. In addition to civil legal services, Amara provides victim-witness advocacy for clients working with law enforcement, criminal/juvenile defense, and representation in criminal record sealing and expungement cases.

In the media, sex trafficking is often associated with images of young females who are physically restrained or locked away. In reality, there are several different kinds of trafficking (i.e. pimp-controlled, gang-controlled, familial, intimate-partner trafficking) and traffickers exercise forms of power and control over both male and female victims. It is crucial for youth to understand that traffickers exercise non-physical forms of control, such as emotional manipulation, gaslighting, social media and revenge pornography, illicit substances, and intimidation through gang networks. The failure to correct myths about trafficking prevents youth from being able to accurately identify trafficking situations. Amara has represented youth trafficked in Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, Anne Arundel County, and Baltimore County.

In a time where 22% of teenagers log on to their favorite social media site more than 10 times a day and more than half of adolescents log on to a social media site more than once a day,¹ we need to teach our children that traffickers are expert manipulators who use social media to recruit. It is important to teach youth to be cautious and beware of those who may seek to manipulate, exploit, and target young people. In the past, we have seen traffickers reach out to multiple teenagers in a school, add them as friends or followers, and use that smokescreen to show the teens that they are “safe.” The trafficker will then single out one or two individuals who the trafficker will groom, pretending to be a suitor until the trafficker is ready to have their victim begin to “work.” Similarly, traffickers will use promises of cell phones to lure victims into sex trafficking. Seventy-five percent of teenagers now own cell phones, and 25% use them

¹ <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/127/4/800#ref-2>



for social media, 54% use them for texting, and 24% use them for instant messaging.² Teenagers and children can be easily manipulated with a promise of a cell phone, especially children from marginalized and under-resourced communities.

Youth who are trafficked often face serious collateral consequences, such as involvement in the juvenile justice system for crimes committed while being trafficked, or an addiction developed as a result of the trafficker using substances as reward or punishment. Educating students on trafficking at a young age can help them avoid the trauma of trafficking as well as any negative repercussions. Teaching youth how to identify trafficking situations and where to seek help will make an invaluable contribution to the trafficking prevention effort in Maryland.

The Amara Legal Center also supports the amendments proposed by the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MDHTTF). In particular, Amara encourages the expansion of the bill from grades six through eight to grades six through twelve. Both middle school and high school students are at risk of being trafficked. Amara has worked with clients as young as 11 years old and as old as 91. Human trafficking has no age limits. Traffickers prey on vulnerable populations. Therefore, continued age-appropriate education can play a significant role in youth building the skills to recognize and avoid trafficking situations. Similarly, Amara encourages collaboration between service providers working with trafficking survivors and educators to develop a curriculum that reflects the day to day realities of trafficking in Maryland. By inviting service providers to train educators and students on trafficking, or forming a work group including service providers to create the curriculum, youth will have access to up-to-date information on trafficking, grooming, and recruitment trends. It is imperative that we share information and expertise so that youth have the tools needed to avoid being trafficked. For these reasons, the Amara Legal Center supports HB138. We respectfully urge a favorable report with the aforementioned amendments.

² <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/127/4/800#ref-3>