

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 477
TITLE: Public Senior Higher Education Institutions – Reproductive Health Services Plans - Requirements
COMMITTEE: Appropriations
HEARING DATE: February 14, 2023
POSITION: FAVORABLE

House Bill 477 would require public institutions of higher education to develop policies that guarantee students access to emergency contraceptives and medicated abortions. The Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports this bill because it will improve access to a full range of sexual health services on campuses, allowing students to maintain bodily autonomy while also eliminating burdens associated with reproductive health care and educational success. For students who engage in high-risk sexual activity and/or experience sexual violence, such as those students engaging in sex work or who have been trafficked, House Bill 477 is crucial to aid in both their academic success *and* their healing.

According to the National Library of Medicine, 61% of women who have children while enrolled in college drop out before earning a degree. The US Centers for Disease Control reports that college aged people (between 15-24 years old) account for nearly half of all STIs in the country. For those students, seeing a provider, accessing trusted information, and finding the right birth control could mean missed classes, time off from work, hours on public transportation and an egregious medical bill. Limited access to contraception, safe abortions, and other reproductive healthcare services is not only detrimental to educational success, but also promotes systemic inequality since the people who are most at risk for dropping out of college —low-income Americans and racial minorities—are also the ones who are most likely to unexpectedly become pregnant at an early age. These ethnic and socioeconomic disparities will only be exasperated if we don't take immediate action.

The need for more accessible reproductive services is even more dire for victims of human trafficking, given that high-risk sexual activity and sexual violence is such a common part of their victimization. Unsurprisingly, the majority of sex trafficking survivors experience pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortion either during or after their trafficking.¹ For students who trade sex by choice or out of circumstance, access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare is sorely lacking due to the discrimination, stigma, and criminalization that these individuals routinely face.² A full range of reproductive health services available at public institutions of higher education would allow these students to continue their education, in turn allowing them to take essential steps towards financial independence and self-fulfillment.

¹ See generally, Freedom Network USA, *Human Trafficking Survivors and Reproductive Rights* (Apr. 2015), <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2016/12/HT-and-Reproductive-Rights.pdf>; Laura J. Lederer & Christopher A. Wetzel, *The Health Consequences of Sex Trafficking and Their Implications for Identifying Victims in Healthcare Facilities* 79 (2014), <https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Health-Consequences-of-Sex-Trafficking-and-Implications-for-Identifying-Victims-Lederer.pdf>.

² See generally Azade Zenouzi, et. al., *Reproductive Health Concerns of Women with High Risk Sexual Behaviors* (2021), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/23779608211017779>.

It is imperative that Maryland's public colleges and universities take a vested interest in helping their students stay in school, graduate, and build a lifetime of opportunity. In order to do so, Maryland must ensure that *all* students have access to a full range of sexual health services as a strategic investment in their collegiate success. For students who trade sex, regardless of their reason for doing so, improved access to these services would help support them as they further their education and improve the range of choices which lie ahead. For these reasons, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports House Bill 477, and we respectfully urge a favorable report.