



**HUMAN  
TRAFFICKING  
COLLABORATIVE**

**FAVORABLE- House Bill 892 - Criminal Law: Benefits Trafficking**  
**The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**  
**March 27, 2024**

Dear Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, & Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

The Baltimore City Human Trafficking Collaborative (BCHTC) is a diverse group of stakeholders working in a collaborative effort to combat human trafficking in the City of Baltimore by raising awareness through education, law enforcement training, and media campaigns, supporting both state and federal investigations/prosecutions of traffickers, and supporting human trafficking survivors by providing them access to quality services through a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach. Established in December of 2017, the collaborative is a diverse group of approximately fifty stakeholders including the Mayor's Office, Baltimore City Council, law enforcement, prosecutors, public defenders, judiciary, city and state agencies, health care providers, victim service providers, working together to stop human trafficking in the City of Baltimore. **We urge you to vote favorably on House Bill 0892 (HB0892) - Criminal Law: Benefits Trafficking.**

Individuals who receive public benefits are among the most vulnerable populations due to a variety of factors, including socioeconomic status, physical and mental health challenges, and systemic barriers. They are often faced with limited financial resources, leaving them with little room to negotiate or escape exploitative situations. Some recipients of public benefits have physical or mental health challenges that make them more vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation. Disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health disorders can impact an individual's ability to advocate for themselves or recognize when they are being exploited. While it's challenging to provide specific statistics due to underreporting and the hidden nature of these forms of exploitation among vulnerable populations, evidence suggests that individuals receiving public benefits are disproportionately targeted and exploited through multiple forms of abuse.

Modeled from legislation that was successfully passed in 2018 in the State of Georgia, more and more jurisdictions are pushing for the reclassification of benefits exploitation from financial crimes to expanding forms of human trafficking. **The key element that defines human trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit individuals for various purposes and the victim being exploited is the "product" OR commodity.** Similar to crimes of sex & labor trafficking, benefits exploitation, within the context of human trafficking, underscores the dehumanizing aspect of treating individuals as tools for personal gain, which goes beyond the scope of financial crimes that typically focus on monetary transactions. While financial crimes typically revolve around illegal monetary transactions or fraud, benefits exploitation extends beyond mere economic considerations. It involves the systematic manipulation, coercion, and abuse of individuals for personal gain. That is why more and more jurisdictions are re-classifying this type of exploitation as a form of human trafficking.



## HUMAN TRAFFICKING COLLABORATIVE

Furthermore, the crime of benefits trafficking, as drafted in this legislation, often results in severe human rights violations, including physical and emotional abuse, deprivation of basic needs, and violation of individual autonomy. This emphasis on the violation of human rights aligns closely with the characteristics of human trafficking, distinguishing it from financial crimes that may not necessarily involve such comprehensive mistreatment of individuals.

As societal structures evolve, so do the methods of exploitation. Benefits trafficking reflects a modern form of exploitation that existing laws may not adequately address. By expanding Maryland Criminal Law - Title 3 - Other Crimes Against the Person to establish “benefits trafficking” we ensure that our legal framework keeps pace with changing patterns of exploitation, acknowledging the nuanced and comprehensive nature of the victimization involved.

By recognizing benefits trafficking as a form of human trafficking, this legislation not only acknowledges the gravity of the issue but also empowers law enforcement and social service agencies to take effective measures against those who engage in such illicit activities. It is imperative that we address this gap in our legal framework to safeguard the integrity of our social support systems and break the cycle of exploitation that perpetuates poverty and vulnerability.

Additionally, it should be noted that this legislation of the reclassification aligns with international efforts to combat human trafficking. Recognizing benefits exploitation within the broader framework of human trafficking reflects a commitment to global standards and encourages collaboration on combating these crimes across borders.

In summary, benefits exploitation poses a multifaceted danger by harming individuals, eroding the effectiveness of social welfare programs, contributing to criminal activities, and undermining public trust. Legislation, such as the proposed Benefits Trafficking legislation, is essential in addressing and preventing these dangers by providing a legal framework to prosecute those who exploit government benefits for personal gain.

**We urge a favorable report on House Bill 892, Criminal Law: Benefits Trafficking. We appreciate your dedication to combating severe forms of exploitation and protecting Maryland’s most vulnerable people.**