



MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

**February 20, 2024**

**House Bill 963**  
**Criminal Law – Sexual Solicitation of a Minor, Human Trafficking, and Drug**  
**Distribution – Sensitive Locations**  
**House Judiciary Committee**

**Position: Favorable**

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

**House Bill 963** prohibits a person from committing sexual solicitation of a minor or human trafficking within 5 miles of certain locations; and increasing the distance surrounding certain school property within which a person is prohibited from committing a certain crime relating to drug distribution from 1,000 feet to 5 miles.

The proposed House Bill 963 focuses on safeguarding minors in locations deemed safe for them, such as schools, parks, arcades, playgrounds, and swimming pools, to prevent their exploitation. These specific sites outlined in the bill are identified as areas where traffickers may target potential victims due to the likelihood of minors being present. Notably, the average age of entry into the commercial sex trade is around 12-14 years old.<sup>1</sup>

House Bill 963 aims to enhance the safety of minors and deter illicit activities, particularly in locations considered safe for them. Traffickers commonly employ tactics involving the initiation of harmful activities by building relationships with victims to establish trust. Taking advantage of the familiarity and trust that minors have in these locations, traffickers may masquerade as authority figures or friends. The strategic use of crowded settings in these sensitive locations allows traffickers to blend into large groups, complicating identification by minors if they report an interaction. Furthermore, areas like public spaces or school-sponsored activities, due to potentially lower supervision levels, create opportunities for traffickers to isolate minors.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/USDOE\\_UseCase\\_HT\\_2017.pdf](https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/USDOE_UseCase_HT_2017.pdf)

Recognizing the tactics employed by human traffickers, this bill seeks to enhance the security of public spaces frequented by minors. The Catholic Conference actively supports measures that protect vulnerable populations, especially children. Pope Francis frequently condemns the horror of trafficking in persons, declaring, “human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Safeguarding minors from exploitation, particularly in public spaces, underscores the inherent value of every person created in the image and likeness of God.

For these reasons, the MCC asks for a favorable report on **HB 963**.

Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140410\\_tratta-persone-umane.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/april/documents/papa-francesco_20140410_tratta-persone-umane.html)