



Testimony in support of HB771

February 25, 2026

Good afternoon, Chair and Members of the Committee. My name is Niki Thrash, and I serve as the Executive Director of Heartly House, Frederick County's only provider of comprehensive services for survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and human trafficking.

Heartly House also co-chairs the Frederick County Human Trafficking Task Force and houses one of Maryland's first Child Trafficking Regional Navigator programs—programs that have helped set statewide standards for identifying and supporting trafficked youth.

One critical lesson we've learned is this: **the safety net is only as strong as its least-prepared link.** We have trained schools, law enforcement, first responders, and even banks and hotels. But one sector remains largely untrained—**healthcare professionals**, the very people who see trafficking victims more than any other group.

A national study found that **81% of trafficking victims were seen by a healthcare provider**, yet **fewer than 5% were recognized as victims.** That gap has devastating consequences.

In Frederick County, a 15-year-old trafficking victim was taken to multiple medical offices over several days. She presented with injuries, a sexually transmitted infection, and an adult guardian who would not let her speak or be examined alone. Staff recognized that something was wrong—but the only action they knew to take was calling the National Trafficking Hotline. That alert did reach our team... **one month later.** By then, she had been taken out of state. She has not resurfaced since. With proper training and clear local protocols, that child could have been kept in the exam room longer. Local law enforcement could have been called. She could be safe today.

Our request is simple: give Maryland's medical professionals the tools and training they need not only to recognize trafficking, but to act—safely, quickly, and locally. Healthcare workers are often just another set of hands these victims are passed through. This bill gives them the chance to become the hands that lead a victim to help and safety.

I'll close with the words of Maya Angelou: *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."* This bill ensures our healthcare providers can do better—because they will finally know how.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to protecting Maryland's most vulnerable.