



**BILL NUMBER:** HB 335

**TITLE:** Education - Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program - Human and Sex Trafficking

**COMMITTEE:** Ways and Means

**HEARING DATE:** 2/11/2026

**POSITION:** FAV

The Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MDHTTF), formed in 2007, is a collaborative of multiple disciplines, including law enforcement, prosecutors, victim service organizations, and state government agencies. The MDHTTF has identified specific opportunities to improve Maryland's human trafficking-related statutes based on over a decade of local and national anti-trafficking experiences, consultation with state-based and federal partners, as well as time spent engaging with stakeholders across the state.

House Bill 355 strengthens Maryland's existing Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program by requiring that, for students in grades 6 through 8, the curriculum include material promoting the awareness and prevention of human and sex trafficking in both public and participating nonpublic schools. This targeted, age-appropriate expansion recognizes that middle school students are at a critical developmental stage when traffickers may begin grooming and exploitation, especially through online platforms, social media, and peer relationships.

Members of the Task Force routinely work with youth and young adults who were first targeted when they were in middle school, often by individuals who exploited their unmet needs for safety, affection, and stability. Survivors and families frequently report that they did not recognize the signs of trafficking or understand that what they were experiencing was a crime until long after the exploitation began. Integrating trafficking awareness into the health curriculum will help students identify red flags, understand healthy versus exploitative relationships, and know how to seek help for themselves or a peer.

HB 355 also appropriately recognizes the role of both the State Board of Education and nonpublic schools by requiring each to develop and implement age-appropriate programming and to ensure

that it is taught by trained teachers within the health curriculum. Embedding trafficking content in an existing, systemwide program is an efficient, sustainable strategy that promotes consistency across jurisdictions and reduces the risk that critical prevention information will be treated as optional or “extra.” Training for educators further ensures that these sensitive topics are addressed in a trauma-informed, culturally responsive manner that supports, rather than harms, students who may already be experiencing abuse or exploitation.

From the Task Force’s perspective, HB 355 is a vital prevention measure that complements Maryland’s broader efforts to respond to human trafficking through crisis services, law enforcement, and the courts. Prevention education in schools can interrupt trafficking at its earliest stages, reduce the isolation and shame that traffickers rely upon, and increase the likelihood that youth will disclose concerns to a trusted adult. It also sends a clear message that Maryland takes seriously the exploitation of children and adolescents in every community, including those who may not see themselves reflected in stereotypical images of trafficking.

Members of the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force are willing to serve as a resource to the State Board of Education and local school systems in the development and implementation of this training, including through consultation on best practices and emerging trends in trafficking prevention. We further recommend that the curriculum and related training ultimately be expanded to include students in high school, who also face significant risk of recruitment and exploitation.

For these reasons, the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force respectfully urges the Ways and Means Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 355.

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