



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 207:

SB 207 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

Hearing of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,
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Group on Safe Harbor 2015-2019

The Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative

The Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative (CSTVI) of the University of Maryland School of Social Work is a federally funded program working to improve statewide response to youth victims of sex trafficking who are exploited in the commercial sex industry, often through prostitution, stripping or pornography. CSTVI leads a network of stakeholders to accurately identify victims, train youth-serving professionals in handling complex trafficking cases, and ensure victims receive victim-centered, trauma-informed care.

Since 2012, Maryland has ranked in the top 20 states with the most human trafficking cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline and in 2018, 38% of those cases involved minors.¹ Between July 2013 and October 2019, Child Protective Services (CPS) units in Maryland screened in over 600 reports of child sex trafficking (CST) from across the state. The vast majority of confirmed victims were Maryland residents and 80% of these victims were 15-17 years old when first identified to CPS. The number of CST reports has increased every calendar year since 2013.²

Youth victimized by sex and labor trafficking are often targeted due to pre-existing economic and social/emotional vulnerabilities that a trafficker can use to manipulate and control. ***One of the primary risk factors for trafficking is homelessness.*** A young person without food, a safe place to stay, and protective social supports is vulnerable to traffickers and buyers who offer shelter, money, and love in exchange for commercial sex acts. The Institute of Medicine highlighted this connection between homelessness and trafficking of children, stating “Of the many factors that may increase vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors, especially among adolescents, homelessness is widely considered the most direct contributor” (IOM, 2013.) In one study, 1 in 3 homeless youth reported having to engage

¹ Polaris Project, National Human Trafficking Resource Center. *National Human Trafficking Hotline Statistics*. Accessed June 26 2019 at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/states>.

² 2013-2019 Child Electronic Social Services Information Exchange (CHESSIE), DHS- SSA, as analyzed and reported by the Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative, University of Maryland, School of Social Work.



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in prostitution to survive, with 82% of those youth reporting trading sex for money and 48% trading directly for food or a place to stay.³

SB 207 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

The Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative supports the passage of SB 207, which establishes that unaccompanied minors who are experiencing homelessness have right to consent to admission to shelter programs registered with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development. There is nothing in existing law saying minors cannot consent to emergency shelter but because they are not given the explicit right to consent, shelters are hesitant to admit them because of legal liability. This bill would affirmatively establish their right to consent to emergency shelter, therefore encouraging providers to shelter/serve minors.

In our work with survivors of trafficking, young people often disclose that their exploitation began as a direct result of being homeless. We heard story after story of predatory adults who allowed homeless youth to stay with them, on the condition that the victim had sex with them. As advocates and social workers for teens in Baltimore City and across the Baltimore/DC metro area, we have seen the near total lack of shelter options for minors. Even though child welfare services can, and does, assist some homeless youth, child welfare's principal responsibility is to protect children from abuse or neglect by a parent or guardian. Although many homeless youth have experienced maltreatment, not all will qualify for child welfare services or out of home placement. Whatever the specific system failure, the fact is that every night in Maryland there are young people with nowhere to go. These youth are the ones that traffickers notice.

No child in our community should sleep outside, in a car, or be forced to trade sex with someone in exchange for a few hours of rest. Young people seeking safety and shelter need increased options and resources. Passing SB 207 is a critical step. By affirmatively establishing the legal right of minors to consent to shelter, SB 207 will remove barriers stopping emergency shelters from serving youth. This bill will create a registration system and shelter standards to protect young residents. Lastly, SB 207 will bring Maryland in line with existing federal regulations on parental notification.

For youth without a safe place to sleep tonight, the situation is truly dire. The requirements and protections established by SB 207 will help expand shelter capacity and create services consistent with federal laws and best practices in serving vulnerable youth.

For these reasons, the Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative strongly urges the committee to issue a Favorable Report on SB 207. Please feel free to contact Amelia Rubenstein, LCSW-C at arubenstein@ssw.umaryland.edu with any questions.

³ National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2019) Homeless Youth & Sexual Violence. Retrieved from https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications/2019-02/HomelessYouth_Final%20508.pdf