



**BILL NUMBER:** SB 207

**TITLE:** Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

**COMMITTEE:** Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

**HEARING DATE:** February 5, 2020

**POSITION:** SUPPORT

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### **The Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force**

The Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MHTTF) was formed in 2007 by the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Attorney General of Maryland, and the State's Attorney for Baltimore City to serve as the lead investigative, prosecutorial, and victim services coordinating body for anti-human trafficking activity in Maryland. The task force is a multidisciplinary team of agencies and organizations committed to a victim-centered approach in the fight against human trafficking. Our record of success in interrupting human trafficking operations and serving a range of labor and sex trafficking victims is irrespective of gender, nationality, sexual orientation, or age. Maryland is at the forefront of victim response due to the forward-looking efforts of investigators, prosecutors, concerned citizens, advocates, and legislators who believe the MHTTF's work is necessary to protect human dignity and public safety. The task force is overseen by a Steering Committee comprised of all of the major state agencies and co-chairs of the MHTTF's five subcommittees. Through increasing public awareness, coordinating state policies/protocols, and implementing best practices for investigations, prosecution, victim identification, and victim service response, our message is clear: In Maryland, victims will be recovered and traffickers will be held accountable for their crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Federal law defines human trafficking as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts or labor or services against their will.<sup>2</sup> In a survey done by the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force (MHTTF), victim service providers in Maryland identified 381 victims of sex trafficking served in 2014. Of the sex and labor trafficking victims whose ages were reported, 56% were children<sup>3</sup>. In 2018, Maryland had the second highest number of federally charged criminal defendants in the U.S. with 15 individuals facing human trafficking charges (*2018 Federal Human Trafficking Report*, The Human Trafficking Institute).

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force. "About the Task Force." Retrieved January 2020 at <http://www.mdhumantrafficking.org/mhttf>

<sup>2</sup> National Human Trafficking Resource Center, "What is Human Trafficking?" Retrieved January 2020 at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/what-human-trafficking>

<sup>3</sup> Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force. (2014). *Maryland Human Trafficking Victim Identification and Services Survey: Results from Calendar Year 2014*. Available at [www.mdhumantrafficking.org/reports](http://www.mdhumantrafficking.org/reports).

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

The Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force is proud to support the passage of SB 207, which establishes that unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness have the right to consent to admission to shelter programs registered with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development.

Our task force members, including the service providers working directly with victims, are acutely aware of the incredible vulnerability that being homeless creates for individuals, especially youth. Traffickers can easily manipulate someone who is desperate for safe shelter. Many trafficking survivors identify poverty and lack of stable housing as the factors that made them susceptible to the control of a trafficker.

The MHTTF fully supports SB 207 as it would eliminate barriers to shelter for unaccompanied homeless youth and help ensure youth can access emergency shelter and safety. There is a disturbing lack of shelter options for unaccompanied homeless youth, only three Maryland counties receive grant for Basic Centers (providing emergency care services). Our task force is committed to protecting runaway and homeless youth because these are the same young people exploited through commercial sex or forced labor when their lack of shelter made them prey to buyers and traffickers. Without intervention, these youth become the clients in our victim services programs, the victims in our human trafficking investigations and the witnesses in trials against human traffickers.

In anti-trafficking work, it is rare to have the chance to implement preventative measures. So often we must react to sex and labor trafficking that has already occurred, supporting victims/survivors and prosecuting traffickers. However, in supporting SB 207 and reducing the vulnerability of youth at high risk for exploitation, we have the chance to be proactive and intervene earlier.

Young people seeking safety and shelter need increased options and resources. Passing SB 207 will affirmatively establish the legal right of minors to consent to shelter and remove barriers preventing providers from offering youth a safe place to go, while creating a registration system to ensure shelter staff have been background checked and are safe. This bill would also not change requirements for parental notification or challenge the rights of parents. It is time to look upstream from our human trafficking cases and take thoughtful steps towards protecting Maryland's youth.

***For these reasons, the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force strongly urges the committee to issue a Favorable Report on SB 207. Please feel free to contact Anne Wallerstedt***

*[anne@mdcatholic.org](mailto:anne@mdcatholic.org) or Amanda Rodriguez [arodriguez@turnaroundinc.org](mailto:arodriguez@turnaroundinc.org), co-chairs of the legislative committee, with any questions.*