



ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE † ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON † DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

**February 11, 2020**

**HB 459**

**Criminal Law – Victims of Human Trafficking – Affirmative Defense**

**House Judiciary Committee**

**Position: Support**

The Maryland Catholic Conference (“Conference”) represents the public policy interests of the three Roman Catholic (arch)dioceses serving Maryland: the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington, and the Diocese of Wilmington.

House Bill 459 establishes an affirmative defense of duress for specified crimes that are common for traffickers to force their victims to commit while under their influence.

The Conference strongly supports efforts to eradicate human trafficking by strengthening laws protecting victims against traffickers, providing services and rehabilitation to victims, and increasing awareness of the issue. Pope Francis has strenuously called on society to make every effort to eradicate sex trafficking, which he has called a “shameful and intolerable crime.” Moreover, he has urged government officials to “combat this scourge with firmness, giving voice to our younger brothers and sisters who have been wounded in their dignity, and constitutes a true crime against humanity.” When people are used like commodities, it strips the dignity from their person and lessens their worth as a human life. Human trafficking – both sex trafficking and labor trafficking –is considered modern-day slavery.

It is important to make sure that the statutes used to prosecute traffickers also protect victims; reflecting the reality of how the practices are occurring and how crimes are being committed. House Bill 459 is sorely needed to ensure that our laws are up-to-date and able to handle the immense responsibility of combatting the issue of trafficking.

The Conference appreciates your consideration and, for these reasons, respectfully requests a favorable report on House Bill 459.