



BILL NO: House Bill 194

TITLE: Education – Family Life and Human Sexuality Curriculum – Sexting

COMMITTEE: Ways and Means

HEARING DATE: January 27, 2022

SUBMITTED BY: Caroline Ackerman, Managing Attorney of Maryland Legal Services & Special Projects, Amara Legal Center

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Amara Legal Center writes to support House Bill 194 (HB194). We are grateful that Delegate Shetty introduced this important legislation to enhance education about sexting in public schools. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our thoughts.

The Amara Legal Center (“Amara”) provides free legal services in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia to survivors of sex trafficking and to anyone whose rights are violated while involved in commercial sex. Since 2013, Amara has served over 500 clients. Although many believe that sex trafficking only occurs overseas or among foreign nationals, the vast majority of Amara’s clients are U.S. citizens, both juveniles and adults born and raised in the D.C. metro area. Amara provides brief legal advice, partial and full representation for civil legal issues such as civil protection orders, divorce, child custody and support, and name changes. In addition to civil legal services, Amara provides victim-witness advocacy for clients working with law enforcement, criminal/juvenile defense, and representation in criminal record sealing and expungement cases.

Traffickers frequently target youth online through social media platforms, networking sites, and dating apps. For instance, traffickers reach out to multiple teenagers in a school, add them as friends or followers, and use that smokescreen to show the teens that they are “safe.” The trafficker will then single out one or two individuals to groom, pretending to be a suitor until the trafficker is ready to have their victim begin to “work.” The grooming process often involves sexting, where youth are asked or pressured to share nude and sexual photos with an individual they believe to be a peer, suitor, or significant other. Once the images are shared, traffickers often threaten to distribute them to the victim’s family and friends if she or he does not agree to engage in commercial sex work. Traffickers also post the photos online on advertising and pornography sites. The nature of the Internet and business-driven websites makes it challenging, if not impossible, for survivors to remove these online images. As a result, it is crucial to make youth aware of the potential harms of sexting and the connection to sex trafficking.

HB194 ensures that youth receive age-appropriate education on sexting as part of the Family Life and Human Sexuality curriculum in public schools. This bill recognizes that youth should be given the tools and knowledge to socialize safely on the Internet and avoid traffickers seeking to recruit and groom their next target. Amara strongly supports HB194 and respectfully urges a favorable report.