



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
SAFE CENTER

BILL NO: Senate Bill 148
TITLE: Victim Services Programs – Supplementing Federal Funding and Support (Victim Services Stabilization Act)
COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation
HEARING DATE: January 25, 2023
POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB148:

Victim Services Programs – Supplementing Federal Funding and Support
(Victim Services Stabilization Act)

Summary

SB 148 will provide critical Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) stabilization funds to support trauma-informed services for victims of crime, including human trafficking victims, across Maryland. This bill will ensure victims have access to the services they need by supporting service providers like the University of Maryland SAFE Center with consistent and reliable VOCA funds year-to-year. This bill will backfill gaps by supplementing federal VOCA funds to meet the needs of the state, allowing service providers to plan and execute consistent programs from year to year and protect victims from losing access to a wide range of critical services.

About the University of Maryland SAFE Center for Human Trafficking Survivors

The University of Maryland SUPPORT, ADVOCACY, FREEDOM, AND EMPOWERMENT Center for Human Trafficking Survivors (“SAFE Center”) provides survivor-centered and trauma-informed services that empower trafficking survivors to heal and reclaim their lives. The SAFE Center is an initiative of the University of Maryland Strategic Partnership: MPowering the State, a collaboration between the University of Maryland Baltimore and University of Maryland College Park. The SAFE Center supports survivors of sex and labor trafficking of all nationalities, ages, and genders through bilingual case management, legal, behavioral health, and economic empowerment services.

Testimony

Starting with our first VOCA grant shortly after we opened in 2016, the SAFE Center has relied on VOCA funding to serve victims of sex and labor trafficking and eligible family members across the state of Maryland in four critical service areas: social services, legal services, behavioral health services, and economic empowerment services. Having reliable VOCA funding enables the SAFE Center to provide consistent services to survivors. Ultimately it is survivors who suffer when there is instability and reduction in funding for services from year to year.

In our social services program, VOCA funding has enabled the SAFE Center to provide safety planning and crisis assistance to help survivors meet their emergency basic needs, and intensive case management to help survivors meet their longer-term goals. Without VOCA funding, we would not be able to provide the critical advocacy, safety planning, court accompaniment, psychosocial support, and resource connections, as well as food, rental assistance, and clothing needed to keep clients safe, healthy, and able to take meaningful steps towards their goals.

In the SAFE Center’s legal program, VOCA funds have made it possible to provide life-changing immigration legal services for our foreign national survivors of human trafficking, securing T visas, asylum, and other immigration relief so that trafficking survivors can live safely in the United States. In

many cases, VOCA funds also support our work to reunite clients with their children from whom they have been separated for many years due to human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a highly traumatizing crime. VOCA funding enables the SAFE Center to provide bilingual English and Spanish behavioral health services that help trafficking survivors to process traumatic experiences in a safe space, stabilize, decrease negative behavioral health symptoms, and increase their capacity to engage in daily living activities with fewer challenges after the trafficking victimization experience. Our long-term clinical services address serious mental health needs including PTSD, depression, dissociative and anxiety disorders, and other complex trauma symptoms.

Financial stability is fundamental to the ability to exercise agency and self-determination. VOCA funding supports the SAFE Center's economic empowerment program, which is focused on education, job readiness, and job placement and retention.

In addition to individual direct services, VOCA funds Maryland's Regional Navigator Program, which serves survivors of sex trafficking up to age 24. The vision for Maryland is that every child and young person who is a victim of sex trafficking is able to access services immediately. The goal of the program is to provide young sex trafficking survivors in Maryland with services, instead of steering them into the juvenile justice system. The SAFE Center is the Regional Navigator in Montgomery and Prince George's County. This successful program needs more VOCA funding to support a network of providers throughout Maryland that can provide trauma-informed services to young sex trafficking survivors.

Finally, supplemented VOCA funds are critical at this time as COVID emergency funding dries up but the needs of our clients remain. COVID has had a profoundly destabilizing effect on human trafficking survivors, and stabilizing VOCA funds will ensure clients have continued and reliable access to housing, rental assistance, support for basic needs, and a myriad of other services that facilitate SAFE Center clients' ability to move toward self-determination, empowerment, safety, security, and healing.

For these reasons, the University of Maryland SAFE Center supports SB148: Victim Services Programs – Supplementing Federal Funding and Support (Victim Services Stabilization Act).

Laura Ardito, JD
Deputy Director
University of Maryland SAFE Center
For Human Trafficking Survivors
Laura.ardito@umaryland.edu
301-314-7233

Sophie Aron, MSW
Research and Program Coordinator
University of Maryland SAFE Center
For Human Trafficking Survivors
Sophie.aron@umaryland.edu
410-200-6259