

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 630
TITLE: Public Utilities – Primary and Secondary Account Holders – Domestic Violence
COMMITTEE: Economic Matters
HEARING DATE: February 16, 2023
POSITION: SUPPORT

House Bill 630 will allow for a victim of domestic violence to remove themselves from a shared utilities account or contract without penalty. The Human Trafficking Prevention Project supports this bill because it addresses one of the many obstacles victims of domestic violence face when attempting to leave an abusive relationship, many of whom are also victims of human trafficking.

There are many barriers a victim of domestic violence must overcome when planning to leave a violent and abusive relationship. Enabling a victim of domestic violence to remove themselves from a shared utilities account or contract improves the possibility that they can separate from their abuser and establish a safe life elsewhere. The documentation required for eligibility is comparable to what is required to enroll in the Address Confidentiality Program.¹ Eligibility for the Address Confidentiality Program is also contingent upon the relocation of a victim to a new address compounding the importance of a victim's ability to establish themselves separately from their abuser.

To fully appreciate the need for HB 630 it is important to understand some of the complexities of domestic violence and its intersection with economic justice. The most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is when they leave, increasing the risk of homicide as well as increased violence.² It is also estimated that between 94-99% of domestic violence victims have experienced economic abuse.³ Additionally, 38% of all victims of domestic violence become homeless at some point in their lives,⁴ which is a direct predictor of both labor and sexual exploitation.⁵

Safety planning is one of the many services domestic violence programs provide and it is crucial for the safety of the victim leaving and any children or other relatives escaping with them. Domestic violence service providers in Maryland report that one of the significant issues that they navigate with victims when planning a safe exit is utility accounts. They encounter obstacles in establishing new accounts often because there are existing accounts. Victims may not even have known their names were on those accounts at all and there may be money owed. It is imperative that the abuser not be alerted that any changes have been to an account since that could trigger their knowledge that their victim is planning to leave. This is not the termination of the utility account but the removal of one party's name and obligation, the victim.

¹ MD STATE GOVT § 7-304.

² <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>.

³ <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/quick-guide-economic-and-financial-abuse>.

⁴ https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Library_TH_2018_DV_Housing_Homelessness.pdf.

⁵ See generally Polaris, *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking, Housing and Homelessness Systems* (July 2018), <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Housing-and-Homelessness-Systems.pdf>.

Other states have begun to address this issue. The most comparable to HB 630 is New York's statute which allows for a victim of domestic violence to remove their name and opt-out of a shared utility, phone, and television contract without penalty with self-attestation that they are a victim of domestic violence.⁶ The need to be released from an existing contract is most consistent with the initial identified need of victims of domestic violence in Maryland who find themselves on a shared utilities contract and planning to escape their abuser.

Leaving a violent relationship is far from simple and is often a process rather than a one-time event. House Bill 630 is intended to address one of the many obstacles victims face during this process and will therefore improve the likelihood of their safe escape. **For these reasons, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project supports House Bill 630. We respectfully urge a favorable report.**

⁶ <https://law.justia.com/codes/new-york/2022/pbs/article-2/48-a/>