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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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The Senate Finance Committee

**SB 832 – Public Health – Pregnancy – Coercion (Coercive Abuse Against
Mothers Prevention Act)**

Statement of Support by Bill Sponsor Senator Mary Beth Carozza

Thank you Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the distinguished Senate Finance Committee for this opportunity to present Senate Bill 832 – Public Health – Pregnancy – Coercion (Coercive Abuse Against Mothers Prevention Act).

Over the past year, Maryland has dramatically expanded access to abortion. The Abortion Care Access Act of 2022 expanded the number of health care providers who can perform abortions to include non-physicians and established a special fund to enable greater access to abortion services. This session, the Senate already has passed legislation requiring public institutions of higher education to provide reproductive healthcare plans and services, and this Maryland General Assembly has made it a top priority to enshrine the right to an abortion in the Maryland Constitution. These combined legislative actions prioritized by this Maryland General Assembly not only has significantly increased access to abortion for Maryland women but also has attracted other women from other states to seek Maryland out as an abortion destination.

The passage of SB 798, Declaration of Rights – Right to Reproductive Freedom, virtually limits any possibility of abortion safeguards, which makes this legislation (SB 832) that I am presenting today take on a new sense of urgency. As the State of Maryland expands access for women to exercise their right to have an abortion, we also have an obligation to protect a woman's right to protect her pregnancy and prevent abortion coercion.

Senate Bill 832 does not restrict a woman from having an abortion or using reproductive services like contraception. This legislation is intended to ensure that women are provided a true choice when it comes to pregnancy.

This bill states that an individual who knows or suspects that a woman is pregnant may not engage in certain specific conduct with the intent of directing the pregnant woman to have an abortion. This includes committing, attempting to commit, or threatening to commit physical harm to the pregnant woman; revoking a scholarship awarded to a pregnant woman by an institution of higher education; discharging the pregnant woman from employment or changing

compensation; and denying any social assistance, housing, or financial support to a pregnant woman.

This legislation includes important protections against human trafficking of pregnant women including prohibiting the selling, attempting to sell, or threatening to sell the pregnant woman into sex trafficking and to sell or threaten to sell the unborn baby of the pregnant women into sex trafficking once her baby is born. The legislation also prevents an individual from forcing, attempting to force, or threatening to force the pregnant woman to continue to engage in sex trafficking.

SB 832 would establish a misdemeanor penalty for coercing a pregnant woman to have an abortion where violators would be subject to a maximum fine of \$1,000.

Often, a woman who discovers that she is pregnant under not ideal circumstances finds herself at a crossroads with a series of choices. The trajectory of her life changes once she knows she is pregnant. Subtle forms of pressure can go unnoticed until the only option seems to be abortion. In other cases, the coercion is far more blatant, discriminatory, and sometimes results in physical violence.

Studies have found that many women who seek counseling services after having an abortion were pressured into terminating their pregnancies by their husbands, boyfriends, or family members. After having an abortion, many of these women reported symptoms of depression, guilt, shame, regret, self-hatred, feelings of worthlessness, feelings of being unworthy of love, low self-esteem, and anxiety. Some studies have found up to 9 percent reported drug or alcohol addiction, and 6.2 percent reported thoughts or attempts of suicide.

Many young women are not receiving adequate support from the people who matter most in their lives when it comes to having the freedom to choose. Women are taught from a young age to put others before themselves, often completely forgetting to take care of their own needs. In a situation of extremes, like choosing to continue or terminate a pregnancy, women can often feel pressured to make a decision that does not align with their internal wants and desires. This pressure is even more terrifying in situations of domestic violence or human trafficking.

It is estimated that 24.9 million men, women, and children worldwide are subjected to the abuses of human trafficking. It happens in plain sight, and many victims are coerced by their trafficker into participating in their own abuse. As many of you know, victims and traffickers alike have told law enforcement that Maryland is a “goldmine” for human trafficking due to our central location, numerous rest stops, truck stops, and bus stations, and the I-95 corridor is a main gateway to major cities along the Eastern seaboard.

A groundbreaking study from 2014 looked at many facets of human trafficking, including the correlation between human trafficking and abortion. Of the women who survived human trafficking that participated in the study, 55 percent had at least one abortion, 30 percent had multiple abortions, and 55 percent had forced miscarriages.

Abortions like these are taking place right here in Maryland, and health care providers need to be educated and empowered to act should a victim of human trafficking enter their office to obtain such services. This legislation would allow health care providers, should they suspect their patient is a victim of coercion, to wait 24 hours before performing the procedure (although the health care provider is empowered to waive that waiting period). Further, an employee or volunteer of a healthcare facility who knows, alleges, or suspects that a woman is being coerced into having an abortion must notify local law enforcement within 48 hours. Ideally, this would allow investigations to take place, perpetrators to be arrested, and human trafficking victims to be freed and begin the healing process.

This bill is not intended to prevent abortion. This bill is intended to prevent women from being further victimized by a system that does not value them. This bill empowers women to seek action and to prevent the perpetrator from continuing to coerce other women into having abortions.

Senate Bill 832 is commonsense legislation that seeks to protect all women from abortion coercion, especially at a time when abortion has become so readily available in the State of Maryland.

Thank you for your kind attention and consideration, and I request the Committee grant a favorable report to SB 832.