**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF BEKAH CHARLESTON**
**Before the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**
**IN OPPOSITION to Senate Bill 192 – Facial Recognition Technology**


**February 8, 2023**


I am Bekah Charleston, CEO and Co-Founder of Charleston Law Center, a non-profit organization committed to ending sex trafficking and exploitation by providing pro bono legal services to its victims. As a survivor of over a decade of sex trafficking, I strongly oppose Senate Bill 192 and would like to share my personal testimony to offer a unique perspective on this issue.

During my experience with sex trafficking, law enforcement failed to correctly identify me due to the false identity my trafficker had obtained for me. This made it appear as though I was of legal age and allowed my exploitation in sexually oriented businesses across the country. If facial recognition technology had been available at the time, I believe it could have intervened and put an end to the abuse I suffered. Facial recognition technology can be a valuable tool for investigators as it can help identify victims and traffickers through images, such as a victim's face appearing in ads for sex work or a trafficker being captured on video at a handoff location or committing a related crime.

Unfortunately, Senate Bill 192 severely limits the ability to identify and rescue victims by restricting facial recognition searches to only driver's license databases and mugshots. This narrow scope of searches ignores the reality that trafficking victims, particularly minors, may not have any official records or may be using false identities, like in my case. This would prevent investigators from finding and rescuing victims and limit the ability to detect patterns in trafficking activities. Moreover, the prohibition on queries involving photos of minors puts children who are exploited at greater risk by reducing or eliminating chances of identifying them. The use of facial recognition technology in a broader range of databases, such as social media and online classified ads, could be crucial in identifying victims and detecting patterns in trafficking activities. High-performing facial recognition technology, trained on robust data sets, can also aid law enforcement in conducting more trauma-informed investigations, as it reduces the dependence on victim corroboration.

Every day that I was not identified was another day of abuse and violence, and I believe the same is true for countless other victims of sexual violence. The technology can help law enforcement quickly identify victims, so they can be rescued and begin their journey toward healing. Additionally, it can help identify and hold perpetrators accountable, preventing them from finding new victims for their abuse.

Victims of sexual violence deserve to be identified and rescued, and facial recognition technology has the potential to make this a reality. As a survivor, I understand the complex, compounded trauma faced by these victims and the importance of their identification in the pursuit of justice and healing.

I urge you to reconsider the limitations outlined in Senate Bill 192 and to find a solution that prioritizes not only the safety and well-being of trafficking victims, but also the public safety in general. The use of facial recognition technology can be a valuable tool in the fight against trafficking and other crimes, and it is crucial that we do not limit its potential to protect and serve all members of our community. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.