

# STATE OF MARYLAND

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## House Judiciary Committee

### **HB 297 - Criminal Law - Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking - Safe Harbor and Service Response**

The Office of the Secretary of State requests a favorable report on House Bill 297. This is the 2023 effort to pass Safe Harbor for Youth Victims of Sex Trafficking. Sadly, it has been nearly a decade since this office [initiated and chaired the 2015 in-depth study on the same issue](#). The goals of this legislation are ingrained within our mission to shield the whereabouts of crime survivors under the Address Confidentiality Program, [including survivors of human trafficking](#).

Despite two final reports issued from the Workgroup [in 2017, and 2018](#), as well as important [legislation from 2019](#) in this space, Maryland does not provide Safe Harbor for Youth Victims of Human Trafficking. This status has led to a [failing grade from Shared Hope International's Child and Youth Report Card](#). Their Maryland specific [in-depth analysis](#) is worth reading, but the main takeaway from their insights for the purpose of this hearing is that we can earn high-marks and protect child survivors of trafficking if we simply pass this legislation before you today.

Please stand with youth survivors of trafficking who are accused of minor crimes, so that they may seek and receive vital resources to allow them to regain their lives back. The Address Confidentiality Program has several survivors who identify, or whose families identify their children as survivors of trafficking, but far more are misidentified as merely survivors of intimate partner violence. Our vital services should be available to both categories of victims, but those who commit crimes under duress deserve this relief and the ability to live in safety going forward. Free from the influence of their abusers and traffickers, and in this limited circumstance, free from an arrest and the long-term harm that interaction may cause. We want youth victims of human trafficking to seek services, not run away from them, but the status quo reinforces distrust of law enforcement, which is drilled into the heads of trafficked children, and revictimizes those who we should instead encourage to seek help.

For these reasons, the Office of the Secretary of State asks for a favorable report on HB 297.