



VICTIM SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

February 9, 2023

The Honorable Luke Clippinger
Chair, House Judiciary Committee
Room 101, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support – HB 297 - Criminal Law - Victims of Child Sex Trafficking - Safe Harbor and Service Response

Dear Chairman Clippinger:

House Bill 297 alters the procedures that a law enforcement officer and a court are required to follow when either has reason to believe that a detained child is a victim of sex trafficking. Minors may not be criminally prosecuted or have proceedings brought against them as delinquent children for certain crimes or civil offenses if the minors committed the crime or civil offense as a direct result of sex trafficking. Among various notification requirements, the law enforcement officer must alert the regional navigator to determine the child's service needs.

The Montgomery County Victim Services Advisory Board (VSAB) advises the County Council and County Executive on meeting the needs of crime victims. These include victims of a broad range of violent crimes, including rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. The number and severity of sexual assault and domestic violence cases referred to Montgomery County HHS Trauma Services increased substantially in the last several years when comparing intake data. Victims of child sex trafficking are often runaways fleeing untenable situations of family abuse, drug addiction and homelessness, making them easy prey for sex offenders. Traffickers often target victims with these and other vulnerabilities including those who struggle with mental health issues, as well as recent migration/relocation challenges. (<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Human-Trafficking-Trends-in-2020-by-Polaris.pdf>).

Maryland was ranked as one of the 10 worst states (44th place) to receive a failing grade in every category listed by the Shared Hope International 2021 Report on Child & Youth Sex Trafficking. The report examined both “safe harbor” laws to prevent minors’ prosecution and the state infrastructure for connecting children with needed help and resources. Maryland needs to do more to identify these children and to provide them with help. House Bill 297 protects children who are charged with prostitution or solicitation, theft, drug possession, and other nonviolent crimes committed under pressure from those controlling their activity. The notification requirements ensure that children who are victims of sex trafficking will receive the assistance they need.

VSAB asks the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 297.

Sincerely,

Neda Bolourian
VSAB Co-chair

Department of Health and Human Services