



**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0297**  
**Criminal Law – Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking**  
**– Safe Harbor and Service Response**

BILL NO: House Bill 0297

TITLE: Criminal Law – Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking – Safe Harbor and Service Response

SPONSOR: Delegate J. Sandy Bartlett

COMMITTEE: Judiciary

HEARING DATE: February 9, 2023 at 1:00 p.m.

POSITION: Favorable

From: Rhonda Sanco, MBA, Executive Director and CEO of Araminta

Date: February 7, 2023

Araminta is a nonprofit organization that works to end the threat and trauma of child sex trafficking. We provide clinical and support services to child trafficking survivors in multiple jurisdictions throughout Maryland, as well as implementing education and prevention strategies through education to hundreds of Marylanders each year. In keeping with our mission, Araminta supports the passage of House Bill 297 (HB0297), “Criminal Law – Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking – Safe Harbor and Service Response” into law.

HB0297 will protect children who are victims of sex trafficking from arrest, prosecution, or detainment for prostitution or other related crimes they were forced to commit by a trafficker. The Safe Harbor law will have no or little impact on state and local budgets but will make a huge difference in the lives of the most vulnerable children and youth in Maryland.

A child cannot be complicit in their own abuse, yet under Maryland’s current laws, underage victims are being criminalized. In fact, 110 underage victims were arrested for prostitution and commercialized vice in our state between 2010 and 2020; thirty percent (30%) of those were under age 15.<sup>i</sup> Maryland ranks behind 42 other states and the District of Columbia in legislation to protect children and youth who have been sexually exploited through the crime of human trafficking.<sup>ii iii</sup> It is past time to change that. Maryland can – and should – lead the way in addressing sex trafficking in our communities.

Safe Harbor is common-sense legislation because there is no such thing as a child prostitute. We need to protect kids who are victims of child sex trafficking, not prosecute them for crimes they are forced to commit by their traffickers. We should work hard to put the traffickers behind bars, but we need to stop criminalizing victims.



Victims of this crime experience complex trauma that requires specialized services, including therapy and intensive case management with wraparound services focused on basic needs provision, housing, legal assistance, education, and workforce development. Maryland began offering victims of child sex trafficking access to specialized services through the 2019 regional navigator legislation. However, this response does not extend to underage victims who are incarcerated for actions resulting from their exploitation. Because of this, survivors of child sex trafficking experience additional trauma without access to healing, restorative services. HB0297 will strengthen existing Maryland law to support minor trafficking survivors by recognizing the impact of a trafficker's control and exploitation on their behavior as well as referring them to needed services.

Araminta provides free services to individuals who have experienced child sex trafficking, including trauma therapy, intensive case management with wraparound supports, and one-to-one mentoring. In 2022 alone, Araminta provided tailored clinical and support services to 33 children, youth, and young adults, as well as direct and indirect support to 11 of their dependent children. Sixty-seven percent (67%) were under age 18 at their initial enrollment in our programs; twenty-seven percent (27%) were 18 to 24 years old at enrollment, although their victimization started while they were under age 18. Of those served last year, 41% are confirmed child sex trafficking victims; 41% meet the criteria of child sex trafficking victim but do not yet self-identify as survivors; and 18% are at high risk of experiencing human trafficking due to other forms of abuse they have experienced, or the trafficking of their siblings.

On behalf of Araminta, thank you for the work you do to protect children in our state. Our organizational experience in serving survivors of child sex trafficking underscores the need for additional protective legislation through the Safe Harbor bill; therefore, Araminta supports HB0297 and respectfully urges you to vote in favor of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rhonda Sanco".

Rhonda Sanco  
*Executive Director and CEO*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/03/31/maryland-child-sex-trafficking-law/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://reportcards.sharedhope.org/safeharbormap/?location=md>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/21/child-sex-trafficking-report-card-states-maryland/>