

Date: February 9, 2023

Bill number: HB0297

Committee: House Judiciary Committee

Bill title: **Criminal Law - Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking - Safe Harbor and Service Response**

DHS Position: **LETTER OF INFORMATION**

The Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide written information regarding House Bill 297 (HB 297).

DHS supports the intention of HB 297 to address the revictimization and expanded impact of trauma on individuals who are suspected of an alleged criminal offense if the child is determined to be a victim of sex or human trafficking and the qualifying offense was the direct result of trafficking. Victims of trafficking deserve the best trauma informed care that can be provided.

Since 2013, the Social Services Administration (SSA) has partnered with the University of Maryland School of Social Work to develop a comprehensive child welfare response to child trafficking and this partnership has led to collaboration between Local Departments of Social Services (LDSSs), the Regional Navigators, the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth and Victim Services and the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force. DHS has representation at the monthly Victims of Trafficking meeting which is a subcommittee of the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force. In 2015, The University of Maryland School of Social Work and DHS/SSA developed training about human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the child welfare system. In 2019, this training became required for new child welfare employees through the Child Welfare Academy's foundation track. In 2021, a workgroup composed of representatives from the LDSS and Regional Navigator Programs developed a report on best practice recommendations for how to support collaboration and coordination of services through this initiative. This workgroup generated creative solutions to address barriers to serving Trafficking victims, as well as practice guidance for future Regional Navigator Programs and LDSS. Aside from work related to sex trafficking, DHS participates in the Maryland Child Labor Trafficking Learning Collaborative to support the State's efforts to better understand the issue of child labor trafficking and to develop best practice recommendations for improving identification of labor trafficking victims and access to services.

The Regional Navigator program has been a great start to providing specialized services for victims of trafficking. As of January 2023, the Regional Navigator Program is active in ten jurisdictions with ten more jurisdictions that have recently been awarded grant funding; however, the positions have not been filled. The ten jurisdictions with active Regional Navigator Programs have seen turnover and do not all currently have someone in the position. The positions are not state positions, but rather grant funded. The Regional Navigator program does not offer specialized placement or housing services that many victims of trafficking require. The bill is unclear as to what will occur in the jurisdictions without the Regional Navigator position filled.

DHS is committed to serving vulnerable populations including children and adolescents who have been victimized through trafficking. Experiences from the LDSS in serving victims of trafficking demonstrates a



need for a broad array of evidence-based treatment that is not necessarily available in all jurisdictions. Even when treatment programs exist, they may not meet the needs of individuals who have been traumatized by repeated victimization that often occurs from trafficking. To effectively implement the intentions of HB 297 as it is currently written specialized services for the population must also be addressed.

The Department is grateful to offer the aforementioned information on HB 297 for the Committee's consideration during your deliberations and welcomes the opportunity to discuss further.

