

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 630
TITLE: Public Utilities – Primary and Secondary Account Holders – Domestic Violence
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
HEARING DATE: March 28, 2023
POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

House Bill 630 will allow for a victim of domestic violence to remove themselves from a shared utilities account or contract without penalty. **The Human Trafficking Prevention Project supports this bill with amendments because it addresses one of the many obstacles victims of domestic violence face when attempting to leave an abusive relationship, many of whom are also victims of human trafficking.**

There are many barriers a victim of domestic violence must overcome when planning to leave a violent and abusive relationship. Enabling these victims to remove themselves from a shared utilities account or contract improves the possibility that they can separate from their abuser and establish a safe life elsewhere. The documentation required for eligibility is comparable to what is required to enroll in the Address Confidentiality Program.¹ Eligibility for the Address Confidentiality Program is also contingent upon the relocation of a victim to a new address compounding the importance of a victim’s ability to establish themselves separately from their abuser.

To fully appreciate the need for HB 630 it is important to understand some of the complexities of domestic violence and its intersection with economic justice. The most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is when they leave, increasing the risk of homicide as well as increased violence.² It is also estimated that between 94-99% of domestic violence victims have experienced economic abuse.³ Additionally, 38% of all victims of domestic violence become homeless at some point in their lives,⁴ which is a direct predictor of both labor and sexual exploitation.⁵

Safety planning is one of the many services domestic violence and anti-human trafficking programs provide and it is crucial for the safety of the victim leaving and any children or other relatives escaping with them. Domestic violence service providers in Maryland report that one of the significant issues that they navigate with victims when planning a safe exit is how to address the existence of shared utility accounts. Victims commonly encounter obstacles in establishing new accounts because there are existing accounts that victims may be unaware they are listed on or on which there may be money owed. In addition, it is imperative that the abuser not have any knowledge of changes made to the account since this could alert them to the fact that their victim is planning to leave. HB 630 would not provide for the termination of the utility account, but rather the removal of the victim’s name from and obligation to the account.

¹ MD STATE GOVT § 7-304.

² <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>.

³ <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/quick-guide-economic-and-financial-abuse>.

⁴ https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Library_TH_2018_DV_Housing_Homelessness.pdf.

⁵ See generally Polaris, *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking, Housing and Homelessness Systems* (July 2018), <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Housing-and-Homelessness-Systems.pdf>.

Thankfully, other states have begun to address this issue. The most comparable to HB 630 is New York's statute which allows for a victim of domestic violence to remove their name and opt-out of a shared utility, phone, and television contract without penalty with self-attestation that they are a victim of domestic violence.⁶ The need to be released from an existing contract is most consistent with the initial identified need of victims of domestic violence in Maryland who find themselves on a shared utilities contract and planning to escape their abuser.

Leaving a violent relationship is far from simple and is often a process rather than a one-time event. House Bill 630 is intended to address one of the many obstacles victims face during this process and will therefore improve the likelihood of their safe escape. **For these reasons, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project supports House Bill 630 with the following amendments: on page 3, line 24, strike "PEACE" and substitute "PROTECTIVE."** We respectfully urge a favorable report.

⁶ <https://law.justia.com/codes/new-york/2022/pbs/article-2/48-a/>