

BILL NO: House Bill 508
TITLE: Children – Labor Trafficking
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 15, 2024
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

House Bill 508 would add labor trafficking to the list of conditions under which a local department of social services is authorized to ask a juvenile court to find that reasonable efforts to reunify a child with a parent or guardian are not required. It would also expand this body's 2023 Safe Harbor Legislation, which already has a regional navigator program, to apply to victims of child labor trafficking. The Women's Law Center of Maryland (WLC) supports HB 508 because it offers trauma-informed protections and services to labor trafficked youth that were created and already exist for sex trafficked youth.

Many youth in Maryland are at risk for labor trafficking. And many of them are at particular risk as they are foreign nationals who often do not have the language ability, resources, knowledge of laws, or access to legal work possibilities that may enable them to evade being labor trafficked. The Regional Navigator system is already set up to assist victims of sex trafficking and can offer the same assistance to labor trafficked children. HB 508 would define labor trafficking as a form of child abuse and neglect, causing mandated reporting and ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are connected to critical services. In addition, HB 508 would expand Regional Navigator funding to assist with housing costs, which is a crucial need for trafficked victims.

The WLC has had at least one case this past year where along with intimate partner violence, the perpetrator was labor trafficking his own teenaged children, forcing them to work for his company rather than attending school. This unconscionable action traumatized these children and put them behind educationally.

For these reasons, the WLC urges a favorable report for HB 508.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.