



February 15, 2024

**HB 508
Employment Discrimination – Labor Trafficking**

House Economic Matters Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) offers this testimony in support of House Bill 508. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

Our vision for Maryland is that every young person who is a victim of human trafficking is able to access services immediately. In 2019, Maryland passed the *Child Sex Trafficking Screening and Services Act of 2019*, creating the Regional Navigator program and ensuring that every sex-trafficked individual under age 25 has access to local and specialized services. Since then, the program has expanded statewide, and countless minors and young adult victims of sex trafficking have been served by specialized, trauma-informed providers. Pope Francis recently encouraged all efforts be made to combat the scourge of trafficking “*It is a call to take action, to mobilize all our resources in combating trafficking and restoring full dignity to those who have been its victims. If we close our eyes and ears, if we do nothing, we will be guilty of complicity.*”¹

In 2023, Maryland passed *Victims of Child Sex Trafficking and Human Trafficking - Safe Harbor and Service Response*, decriminalizing prostitution and a selection of other nonviolent offenses, for minors who are found to be victims of sex trafficking. While these important pieces of legislation have moved us closer towards our goal of serving every young victim of human trafficking, we need to close the gap for labor trafficking survivors.

¹ Pope Francis, 10th World Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, Feb. 8, 2024

There is a high number of youth vulnerable to labor trafficking in Maryland. Maryland has received the fifth-greatest number of unaccompanied children (UACs) since FY15.² In the first two months of FY24 alone (October 1, 2023-November 30, 2023), Maryland has resettled 616 UACs in Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, Baltimore City, and Baltimore County.³ Because of their lack of access to language, social services, education on workers’ rights, and legal work opportunities, UACs and other foreign nationals are disproportionately vulnerable to labor trafficking. In fact, of the 15,886 victims of labor trafficking identified through the National Human Trafficking Hotline from 2018-2020, 92% were foreign nationals.⁴ For this reason alone, it is imperative that Regional Navigators, who currently serve only young victims of sex trafficking, expand to include young victims of labor trafficking, too.

Despite the abusive and exploitative nature of labor trafficking, unlike sex trafficking, labor trafficking of minors is not currently a recognized form of child abuse or neglect. This means that as a state, we are not protecting and grossly underestimating the number of abused children in our communities. HB508 would change this, defining labor trafficking as a form of child abuse and neglect, therefore a mandated report, ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are connected to critical legal, mental health, and social services.

Currently, funding for housing, including rental assistance, is an unallowable cost under the Regional Navigator Program. In Maryland, we have found that minor and young adult victims of sex and labor trafficking often lack options for where to live and with whom during and after their trafficking. Many of these young victims live in poverty, which is both a root cause and outcome of human trafficking, making housing stability even more out of reach. In response to this need, HB508 would expand Regional Navigator funding to allow for housing costs, which is often one of the most fundamental and foundational needs of victims.

Thank you for your consideration, we respectfully request a favorable report on HB 508.

² Office of Refugee Resettlement . (2023, December 28). Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State. The Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/unaccompanied-children-released-sponsors-state>

³ Office of Refugee Resettlement. (2023, December 28). Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by County. The Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/unaccompanied-children-released-sponsors-county>

⁴ Polaris. (2023, September 27). Labor Trafficking on Specific Temporary Work Visas Report. A Data Analysis: 2018-2020. <https://polarisproject.org/labor-trafficking-on-specific-temporary-work-visas-report/>