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BILL NO:	House Bill 0613
TITLE:	Criminal Procedure - Protection of Identity of Victim of Sexual Assault
COMMITTEE:	Judiciary
HEARING DATE:	February 11, 2025
POSITION:	<b>SUPPORT</b>

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The Women's Law Center of Maryland is dedicated to ensuring the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women throughout the state. We fully support any and all measures aimed at addressing the needs of survivors of rape and sexual assault and as such urge a favorable support for House Bill 0613.

Rape is on the rise in Maryland. FBI data gathered by the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) found over a 15% increase in reporting from 2021 to 2022. One out of every four Maryland women — about 664,454 — has been the victim of rape sometime in her lifetime, and half — about 1,180,150 — as well as more than one third of Maryland's men— about 722,571—have experienced other forms of sexual violence. According to the National Institute of Justice, approximately 68% of women in abusive relationships are also sexually assaulted during the course of the relationship.

HB 0613 extends privacy protections for minor victims of sexual assault to alleged victims of any age, including the right to have their identifying information redacted from an existing filing. The Women's Law Center strongly supports this bill in order to protect survivors from further re-victimization that often occurs when they lose control of their very personal and painful story or when members of their community or the public at large blame, question, disbelieve or harass them. Victims often feel trapped between wanting the abuse to stop and being terrified of other people learning what has been done to them and being held somehow responsible for their own assault. That fear can keep victims silent while the abuse is going on, and for years after it has stopped.

We live in a culture where most sexual violence goes unpunished and is in fact normalized and excused in our media and popular culture. This is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language – often by our highest ranking elected officials and most popular celebrities – the objectification of women's bodies, the glamorization of asymmetrical power dynamics and trivialization of assault as an eventuality of constructed gender norms. Our society demonizes victims, who are most often women and girls, who also face systemic bias and are disadvantaged by their gender as their credibility is often called into doubt and they are held responsible not just for their own behaviors, but for those of their attackers.

If not protected, sexual assault survivors are often excoriated in the press, or more often “doxed” by having their private information released online as “revenge” by their attacker or their abuser's supporters. The exposure of victims and alleged victims' personal details on the internet is another form of assault, and one that has tangible impacts on survivors' physical safety, health, career, family members, etc.

We must do everything we can to end sexual assault in Maryland. In order to do so, we must create a safe environment for reporting in which victims – and alleged victims – do not risk losing everything by exposing these crimes against them. For the above reasons, the Women's Law Center of Maryland strongly urges a favorable report for HB 0613.

*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.*