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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

## **Testimony in Support of HB 497 Preventing Abduction in Youth Transport Act**

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

February 13, 2025 | Judiciary Committee

### **What the Bill Does**

**The Preventing Abduction in Youth Transport Act of 2025 protects vulnerable Maryland teens from the trauma associated with forced transport to residential facilities.** This bill prohibits youth transportation companies from using physical or mechanical restraints on children during transport, except in cases where there is an immediate risk of serious physical harm to the child or others. It also bans the use of restraints as punishment or for staff convenience and requires proper training for any personnel authorized to apply restraints. Additionally, the bill prohibits transportation companies from picking up children between 9:00 PM and 6:00 AM. To enforce these protections, the legislation grants both individuals and the Attorney General the right to pursue civil action against violators, with penalties including injunctive relief, restitution, and statutory damages.

### **Why the Bill is Important**

The troubled teen industry is a multi-billion-dollar network of unregulated residential facilities that claim to rehabilitate struggling youth but instead expose them to neglect, abuse, and psychological trauma. Across the country, thousands of teenagers have been sent to these programs under the guise of therapeutic intervention, only to endure mistreatment ranging from physical restraints to emotional and even sexual abuse. While Maryland does not house many of these facilities, this does not mean that our children are safe from their reach. Teen transport companies operate heavily within the state's borders, forcibly removing children from their homes and transporting them across state lines—sometimes thousands of miles away—to facilities where they have no legal protections or oversight. These transport companies thrive in the shadows, using force, deception, and intimidation to strip teens of their autonomy before they even reach their destination.

Our office has spoken with many Maryland survivors who recall that their nighttime abduction was the most traumatic part of their experience with the troubled teen industry. Their stories are shockingly similar—woken in the dead of night by strangers, restrained with handcuffs or zip ties, blindfolded or hooded, and dragged into the back of a car with no idea where they were going or why this was happening. Many describe the terror of believing they were being kidnapped or harmed, only to later realize their own parents had unknowingly allowed this to happen. Parents of these victims are often unaware of how these companies operate, having been misled into relinquishing temporary guardianship under the guise of helping their child.

This bill is critical not only to stopping these abusive transport practices but also to deterring residential facilities from targeting Maryland families. By regulating these transportation companies, we can shed light on the dark side of the troubled teen industry and provide struggling parents with the transparency they need to make informed decisions for their children.

### **Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably**

We have a rare opportunity to be at the forefront of this fight against the troubled teen industry. Maryland's most vulnerable youth deserve our protection from predatory companies that deceive struggling families and profit from the fear and trauma of the children they abduct. This legislation sends a clear message: Maryland will not be complicit in these abuses.

**I urge you to protect Maryland's children as you would your own.**