

Testimony in Favor

Senate Bill 254 – Education – Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program – Human and Sex Trafficking

Chair, Vice Chair, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is **The Honorable, Dr. Cashenna A. Cross**, and I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 254. I come before you not only as a municipal leader, but as a United States Air Force veteran, a United Nations Peace Ambassador, and a lifelong advocate for families, youth, and vulnerable populations who too often fall through the cracks of our systems.

Human trafficking is not an abstract issue. It is present in our communities, quietly targeting young people who are searching for belonging, stability, or opportunity. In my work across Maryland — through community engagement, youth mentorship, domestic violence prevention initiatives, and international peace efforts — I have seen how exploitation begins long before law enforcement becomes involved. It begins with grooming, manipulation, and silence.

Senate Bill 254 recognizes a critical truth: prevention must start early. By incorporating human and sex trafficking awareness into existing sexual abuse and assault prevention education for middle school students, Maryland takes a decisive step toward protecting children at the age when traffickers increasingly attempt to make first contact — often online and often disguised as friendship or support.

Education is not about alarming children; it is about equipping them. When students understand boundaries, recognize coercive behavior, and know how to seek help, they gain the power to interrupt exploitation before harm occurs. Teachers, families, and communities cannot protect what they have not been taught to recognize.

During my military service overseas and my continued work in public service at home, I learned that safety is built through awareness and preparation, not reaction alone. The same principle applies here. We must move from responding to trafficking after lives are harmed to preventing it before vulnerability becomes victimization.

This legislation strengthens Maryland's existing framework without creating unnecessary burden. It builds consistency, equips educators, and sends a clear message that protecting children is a shared responsibility across every community and every classroom.

Our young people deserve more than warnings after tragedy. They deserve knowledge before danger. Senate Bill 254 provides that protection.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a **Favorable Report** on Senate Bill 254.

Respectfully submitted,

The Honorable, Dr. Cashenna A. Cross
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