



**Mission:** To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy **Vision:** Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities

---

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 254**  
**Education - Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program - Human and Sex Trafficking**  
**Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment**  
**By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)**  
**Position: Favorable with Amendment**  
**Hearing Date: February 18, 2026**

Chair Brian Feldman, Vice-Chair Keryl Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of SB 254, requiring that a certain program on the awareness and prevention of sexual abuse and assault include, for students in grades 6 through 8, material promoting the awareness and prevention of human and sex trafficking.

Early adolescence is a documented high-risk period for grooming and exploitation. Middle school students are increasingly exposed to risk through social media and online platforms. Traffickers frequently target middle school-aged youth through manipulation, false relationships, and online contact—methods that mirror sexual abuse dynamics.<sup>1,2</sup> Prevention education that addresses abuse without addressing trafficking leaves a critical gap.

Trafficking education teaches students to recognize grooming, understand consent and boundaries, and identify red flags. Moreover, human trafficking curriculum also provides students with education and empowerment, equipping them with "the awareness, knowledge, and tools necessary to safeguard themselves and others"<sup>1,3</sup> Research has shown that game-based learning is an effective method for increasing children's awareness of both in-person and online grooming. Elementary schools should consider incorporating developmentally appropriate games into trafficking education to help educate and empower students to recognize and prevent sexual grooming.<sup>4</sup> This bill should consider an amendment to permit the inclusion of game-based instructional strategies within sex trafficking education curricula, as such approaches are shown to enhance student engagement and support effective learning outcomes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Noll, J.G., Haag, A.C., Shenk, C.E. *et al.* (2022). An observational study of Internet behaviours for adolescent females following sexual abuse. *Nat Hum Behav* 6, 74–87. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01187-5>

<sup>2</sup> Sanchez, S. R. P., & Genelza, G. G. (2025). A systematic literature review on sexual exploitation and abuse of children: prevalence, risk factors, and societal responses. *Universe International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, DOI No. – 08.2020-25662434.

<sup>3</sup> Farr, K. (2025). *Insights on the effectiveness of human trafficking curricula for K–8 students* (Order No. 31996368). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3206155593). Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/insights-on-effectiveness-human-trafficking/docview/3206155593/se-2>

<sup>4</sup> Hendrick, A. D., Jupit, A. J. R., & Nordin, A. I. (2024). Empowering Youth through Play: Promoting Awareness of Sexual Grooming among Schoolchildren through Game-based Learning. *Journal of Advanced Research in Applied Sciences and Engineering Technology*, 51(2), 34-44.

Trafficking occurs in every community and often involves someone the child knows. Education reduces stigma, increases early reporting, and strengthens protective factors. It empowers students while reinforcing that exploitation is never the victim's fault.

Including trafficking awareness is a logical, trauma-informed extension of sexual abuse prevention—not an expansion into inappropriate content. It equips students with practical safety knowledge at a developmentally appropriate time.

For these reasons, the Maryland Public Health Association urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 254.

Thank you for your consideration.

---

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.

**Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)**  
**PO Box 7045 · 6801 Oak Hall Ln · Columbia, MD 21045-9998**  
**GetInfo@MdPHA.org [www.mdpha.org](http://www.mdpha.org) 443.475.0242**