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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
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**Testimony in Support of SB 407 - Criminal Law – Sexual Offenses –
Grooming by Persons in Authority**

Mr. Chair, Mr. Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee:

SB 407 is a narrowly tailored child-protection bill that addresses a deficiency in available penalties for cases involving sexual grooming and abuse of children under the age of 13 by persons in positions of authority, in circumstances not fully addressed by existing statutes.

Maryland law already criminalizes sexual abuse when a child is in the care or custody of a person in authority. Law also provides a low level misdemeanor penalty for sex offenses by a person in authority when the child is outside of the person's care. SB 407 addresses situations outside of that formal care context, where an adult's position of authority, trust, or influence is nonetheless used to groom or sexually exploit a young child by providing prosecutors with a stronger tool to respond to these predators.

Recent events, including a widely reported case involving an elementary school in Anne Arundel County, brought renewed attention to this gap. While that case highlighted the issue, the conduct addressed by SB 407 is not limited to schools or any single jurisdiction. The deficiency exists statewide and can arise wherever adults hold positions of authority over children under 13.

Background

Sexual abuse of children often does not begin with a single act. It frequently involves a process of grooming, in which an adult builds trust, tests boundaries, and gradually introduces sexualized behavior.

As explained in testimony from the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA), grooming behaviors are particularly dangerous when committed by persons in authority, because children are more likely to trust, comply with, or feel unable to refuse someone who holds power or influence in their lives.

Appropriate Penalties for Children Under 13. Children under the age of 13 are especially vulnerable. When grooming or sexual contact occurs outside of a formal care or custodial setting, existing statutes may not clearly address the harm—particularly where the conduct does not involve penetration, which is already appropriately penalized in Maryland statutes.

Sexual Solicitation of a Minor to Commit Sexual Contact (touching intimate areas). When a person in authority reaches out to a child with the intent to sexually abuse them through conduct short of penetration, current law may not clearly or consistently apply.

What SB 407 Does

SB 407 closes this gap by:

- Increasing penalties and recognizing the harm caused when a person in authority sexually abuses or grooms a child under 13 outside of a formal care or custody setting;
- Clarifying that when a person in authority reaches out to a child with the intent to sexually abuse them, conduct short of penetration is prohibited under Maryland law;
- Addressing grooming behaviors that are often precursors to more severe abuse;

SB 407 does not expand criminal liability broadly. It is limited to persons in authority, children under 13, and conduct not otherwise covered by existing law.

Statewide Impact

Although the bill was informed by incidents that occurred in Anne Arundel County, the conduct it addresses can occur anywhere in Maryland. Children across the State interact daily with adults in positions of authority—coaches, mentors, volunteers, and others—outside of formal care settings.

SB 407 applies uniformly statewide and ensures consistent protection for children regardless of location or institutional context.

Support

SB 407 is supported by organizations that work directly with survivors of child sexual abuse, including MCASA, Center for Hope, TurnAround, and the Maryland States Attorneys Association.

Closing

SB 407 is a focused, victim-centered update to Maryland law. It reflects how child sexual abuse actually occurs, recognizes the role of grooming by persons in authority, and ensures that children under 13 are protected consistently across the State.

For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB 407.