



HB 501 Criminal Law - Sexual Offense by a Person in a Position of Authority

Committee: House Judiciary Committee

Date: February 10, 2026

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

We are pleased to offer our strong support for HB501. Center for Hope, a subsidiary of the regional medical system LifeBridge Health, includes the third oldest nationally accredited child advocacy center in the nation and the first in Maryland. Since 2010, Center for Hope has trained professionals, youth-serving organizations, community members, and many others on violence intervention and prevention and how to protect the vulnerable. With pioneering approaches to preventing the abuse of children and youth, and youth-serving organizational policy development, Center for Hope's experts indirectly improve the lives of tens of thousands of people across the country each year. Center for Hope has studied the repeated failures of mandatory reporters and youth-serving organizations and understands the extent to which appropriate policies and education can improve outcomes for children and youth. Center for Hope has collaboratively assessed, designed, and assisted with the implementation of child and youth protection policies as well as training for institutions and organizations throughout the nation.

House Bill 501 significantly updates and strengthens Maryland's criminal law related to sexual misconduct committed by individuals in positions of authority over minors. The bill revises the penalty structure for sexual offense in the fourth degree, expands statutory definitions tied to the sex offender registry, and establishes a new offense *Sexual Offense by a Person in a Position of Authority* with distinct criminal penalties. Importantly, HB 501 prohibits individuals in positions of authority from engaging in sexual acts or contact with minors under specified age relationships, increases imprisonment terms for repeat offenders, and adds these offenses as predicate crimes under Maryland's sex offender registration laws.

The bill further enhances protections for children by prohibiting individuals in positions of authority from committing sexual offenses involving children under the age of 13 and by barring individuals previously convicted of certain sexual crimes from committing these violations. HB 501 also amends solicitation provisions to ensure that sexual offenses by persons in authority are included among crimes for which solicitation of a minor is unlawful. Collectively, these changes strengthen accountability for adults who abuse positions of power or trust and better align Maryland's statutes with effective enforcement and public safety practices.

Center for Hope strongly supports HB 501 because it addresses long-standing gaps in Maryland law that have left children vulnerable to abuse by trusted adults. Our experience consistently shows that abuse is most often perpetrated not by strangers, but by individuals who have access, influence, and authority over a child, such as educators, coaches, caregivers, and other trusted adults. By explicitly criminalizing sexual misconduct by individuals in positions of authority and



strengthening penalties and registration requirements, the bill sends a clear and necessary message: exploitation of authority will not be tolerated, and children's safety must come first.

This legislation is also critical because it recognizes the unique dynamics of power and coercion that exist in these cases. Children may lack the ability, language, or confidence to report abuse when the offender controls grades, playing time, housing stability, or access to services. By directly addressing these power imbalances, HB 501 improves accountability, enhances deterrence, and provides clearer tools for prosecutors and child-serving systems. Most importantly, it affirms to survivors and their families that Maryland understands the realities of abuse and is committed to protecting children from those who misuse positions of trust.

While Center for Hope strongly supports HB 501, we encourage the General Assembly to consider future enhancements that reflect national best practices on grooming and prevention, as seen in states such as New York and New Jersey. These states have moved toward more explicit statutory recognition of grooming behaviors, patterns of conduct used by offenders to gain a child's trust, isolate them, desensitize boundaries, and normalize inappropriate behavior before abuse occurs. Such behaviors often include excessive private communication, gift-giving, special privileges, gradual boundary violations, and efforts to separate a child from peers or protective adults. Explicitly defining grooming in statute, either as an element of certain offenses or as a standalone prohibited conduct, would allow for earlier intervention and more accurate investigations that reflect how abuse actually unfolds.

These measures shift the focus from reacting after harm has occurred to preventing abuse before it happens, an approach that aligns with national child advocacy standards and, most importantly, keeps children safer. For these reasons, Center for Hope respectfully requests a **favorable report on HB 501.**

For more information, please contact:

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