

BILL NO: HB 508/SB 550
TITLE: Children – Labor Trafficking
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 15, 2024
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The University of Maryland Support, Advocacy, Freedom, and Empowerment (SAFE) Center for Human Trafficking Survivors provides survivor-centered and trauma-informed services that empower trafficking survivors to heal and reclaim their lives. The SAFE Center offers a one-stop-shop for survivors of sex and labor trafficking of all nationalities, ages, and genders to access multi-disciplinary services, including four direct services programs: social services, legal, behavioral health, and economic empowerment. At present, one third of our clients are survivors of labor trafficking.

The SAFE Center aims to prevent trafficking and better serve trafficking survivors through research and policy advocacy. The SAFE Center is an initiative of the University of Maryland Strategic Partnership: MPowering the State – a collaboration between the University of Maryland, Baltimore and the University of Maryland, College Park. We are part of the Graduate School, University of Maryland, Baltimore.

Our vision for Maryland is that every young person who is a victim of human trafficking is able to access services immediately. In 2019, Maryland passed the *Child Sex Trafficking Screening and Services Act of 2019*, creating the Regional Navigator program and ensuring that every sex trafficked individual under age 25 has access to local and specialized services. Since 2019, the SAFE Center has served as the Regional Navigator in Montgomery County and since 2020, the Regional Navigator in Prince George’s County.

Despite the abusive and exploitative nature of labor trafficking, unlike sex trafficking, labor trafficking of minors is not currently a recognized form of child abuse or neglect in Maryland. This means that as a state we are not protecting and grossly underestimating the number of abused children in our communities. In addition, local Departments of Social Services are not providing services for this uniquely vulnerable population. HB508 would change this, defining labor trafficking as a form of child abuse and neglect, ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are connected to critical legal, mental health, and social services.

Since 2019, the SAFE Center has served 55 Regional Navigator clients and trained 926 community partners to recognize trafficking. For these clients, we have provided case management, therapy, education support, and mentorship, among many other services. During this same period, the SAFE Center has seen an increasing number of minor and young adult victims of labor trafficking in our two Regional Navigator jurisdictions. These survivors have profound medical, mental health, legal, educational, employment, and case management needs. Despite being young victims of human trafficking, this population is not eligible to be served under Regional Navigator. HB508 would change this by making victims of labor trafficking under age 25 eligible for Regional Navigator programs, offering services that could change the trajectory of their lives.

Currently, funding for housing, including rental assistance, is an unallowable cost under the Regional Navigator Program. At the SAFE Center, we have found that minor and young adult victims of labor trafficking often lack options for where to live and with whom during and after their trafficking. Many of these young victims live in poverty, which is both a root cause and outcome of human trafficking, making housing stability even more out of reach. In response to this need, HB508 would expand Regional

Navigator funding to allow for housing costs, which is often one of the most fundamental and foundational needs of victims.

For all the above reasons, the University of Maryland SAFE Center for Survivors of Human Trafficking supports HB508, with confidence that it would continue to move Maryland towards our goal of connecting every young victim of both sex *and* labor trafficking immediately to the services they need.

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