

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Urban and other members of the Committee.

My name is Emily Cahill and I am a student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I am speaking in support of Senate Bill 153, An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children. Under current law, minors engaging in sexual acts for compensation can be arrested and charged with prostitution, which subjects them to criminal penalties. The proposed legislation recognizes that the sexual exploitation of children is not a criminal justice issue; it is a child welfare issue.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the average age at which girls first become victims of prostitution is 12-14 years old. For boys and transgender youth, the average age of entry is 11-13. These children often come from homes where they have been abused, or from families that have abandoned them. It is common for children and teenagers to be coerced into prostitution or enter as a way to support themselves financially. Arrest and prosecution are not the answer. Sending these youths to juvenile detention facilities are not the solution. Arrest will lead to re-victimization and shame which only intensifies the stigma and trauma these victims endure on the streets.

Sexual exploitation is a severe and widespread problem. Connecticut's child and adolescent victims need our support and understanding, not criminal records. It would be more beneficial for our state to stop treating exploited children and adolescents as criminals. Instead, we should identify them as victims and provide outreach and support services to address the trauma these youths have suffered at the hands of their traffickers and other adults. These youths are at risk for HIV and other serious illnesses as well as loss of educational opportunities, and increased vulnerability to abuse. These children and adolescents will require psychological care in a safe environment to start the recovery process in hopes of restoring their strength and sense of self worth. Prosecution and arrest will not likely achieve these goals.

I urge you to support Senate Bill 153 as a step in helping exploited youths in Connecticut. By passing this bill, we will recognize them as victims of trafficking and not criminals. Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.