

Testimony of The Underground - Connecticut
In support of HB 7399 - An Act Concerning Legal Protections For The Victims of Human
Trafficking And The Protection of Minors From Cyber Exploitation

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Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Annmarie Boulay and I have the privilege of working as the Executive Director of The Underground, a faith-based organization that seeks to raise awareness of this issue and assists vulnerable youth and survivors of this crime. The Underground works closely with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and I serve on the Human Anti-trafficking Response Team. Most of our leadership team have been trained in DCF's Anti-Trafficking Curriculum and are certified by DCF to present those materials to both youth and adults. The Underground was founded in 2013 by members of four different churches and now represents almost 200 churches statewide with nearly 2,000 members. In my role as the Executive Director I collaborate with stakeholders all over the state who are working to eradicate human trafficking in our state while providing services and support to victims of this crime. Like HART, The Underground is focused on developing a holistic approach in CT and beyond that focuses on prevention, identification, rescue of victims, prosecution and recovery support. Based on our work with minor victims of human trafficking, I support **HB 7399** – An Act Concerning Legal Protections for the victims of Human Trafficking and the Protection of Minors from Cyber Exploitation, because the children of CT who are being trafficked deserve protection.

This Bill addresses an important gap in Connecticut's ability to provide effective services to survivors of human trafficking. Currently in Connecticut, a victim's communications with a human trafficking counselor is not confidential. Therapeutic care depends on victims having confidence and trust that they can make honest and complete disclosures about the facts, memories, thoughts, and feelings associated with their victimization. They must be able to confide in counselors without risk that the information they share could be disclosed publicly without their consent. This bill will enable children who have been trafficked to speak openly to trained service providers confidentially. It will also offer additional protection to those children who committed crimes as a direct result of their trafficking and expand the definition of commercial sexual abuse to include online exploitation.

One of the survivors we work with—let's call her Miss X—was trafficked online from 13 to 15 years of age. Prior to her exploitation she had reported to people in a position of authority that she had been sexually abused. For reasons that only those individuals can explain, those in authority sided with her abuser(s)—who were known to them. That taught Miss X that she did not have a voice; that speaking up wouldn't make a difference. If Miss X had had a confidential person to whom she could report her abuse it might have helped her to avoid or escape trafficking.

Some may feel that being in a hard place like that should be reason enough to speak up. We are all familiar with the idea of a plea-bargain, where someone who is suspected of a crime is offered a lowered penalty or outright immunity in exchange for pleading guilty or testifying against

another suspect. This bill is not asking that victims be given an incentive to speak up, just that we remove any possible barriers to them doing so. If suspects are worthy of such a privilege (or an even greater one), how much more are actual victims? Furthermore, vis-à-vis the question of whether to grant immunity to victims, again I point to the situation where a suspect is offered this option and ask: isn't that the least that we can offer those who have suffered greatly because we were not able to protect them?

Passage of **HB 7399** is critical, because victims of human trafficking deserve the same protections as sexual assault and domestic violence survivors. Your support of this bill will send a message to trafficking survivors that they too deserve the opportunity to have their conversation with a child anti- trafficking counselor be considered privileged communication; allowing them to speak freely and to begin their journey towards healing. Therefore, I urge the committee to support **HB 7399**.

Section 10a of this bill defines commercial sexual exploitation of a minor as an exchange of sex for a fee. I am appealing to this committee to change that language from "fee" to "anything of value".

The aforementioned victim (Miss X) eventually ran away from her abusive home environment and wound up homeless, leading her to engage in "survival sex" or sex in exchange for food and shelter. The language that identifies a "fee" as being necessary would not account for situations like this. I believe that Connecticut law should match Federal law which describes a "commercial sex act" as sex in exchange for "anything of value".

We all have a responsibility as adults to protect our children. Protection can come in many forms. In this case protection is giving them a confidential space to share their abuse so they can begin to heal. Protection is letting our children know that if any one sexually exploits them by offering not only a fee but anything of value, that those individuals will be held accountable for their actions. Protection means elevating the needs of our children above those of their exploiters. Show our children that you are invested in protecting them by supporting **HB7399**. Thank You for your time and attention.