

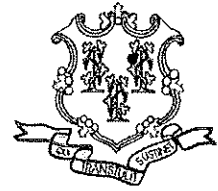


**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Public Hearing Testimony

Judiciary Committee

April 1, 2019



To: Sen. Gary Winfield, Chair
Rep. Steve Stafstrom, Chair
Sen. John Kissel, Ranking Member
Rep. Rosa Rebimbas, Ranking Member
Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Vannessa Dorantes, Commissioner
Department of Children and Families

Re: HB 7399 - An Act Concerning Legal Protections for the Victims of Human
Trafficking and the Protection of Minors from Cyber Exploitation

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) believes that House Bill 7399 is well intentioned and provides critical protections for child victims of human trafficking.

The Department is strongly supportive of the sections of the bill that will protect victims of human trafficking from being prosecuted for crimes that they were forced to commit while being trafficked. Prosecuting victims of these heinous acts, especially victims who are minors, just perpetuates the abuse. Rather, the state should be making efforts to put services in place so they can heal from the trauma they have suffered. DCF also supports including online sexual conduct as a form of sexual abuse of a minor. Far too many children fall prey to the manipulative behavior of perpetrators online, often using anonymity to pretend they are of similar age while grooming children for exploitation.

DCF is pleased that the bill will enhance the reporting of child trafficking to our Careline. Below are some statistics regarding reports of human trafficking that we received last year

- Of 59,152 child abuse and neglect reports created, 137 were identified as Human Trafficking (0.0023%)
- Of 44,792 allegations of child abuse and neglect disposed of, 102 were for concerns of Human Trafficking (0.0023%)
- Of those 102 allegations, 93 were unsubstantiated
- Of the 9 substantiations, 7 identified Human Trafficking victims

The Department is also in favor of ensuring that professionals with training in child anti-trafficking approaches are available to assist minors who are victimized. However, we have concerns with the provisions of the bill that establish child anti-trafficking agencies and counselors.

Creating a new class of counselor narrows rather than expands access to treatment and services and limits a more holistic and comprehensive approach to assessment and service provision. Children who are trafficked often have underlying issues that contributed to their victimization, and deal with troubling aftereffects that emerge following such victimization. Issues may include trauma from previous abuse, homelessness and mental illness, to name a few. The bill limits our ability to provide comprehensive training for a broader array of professionals who may have an established treatment relationship with a minor.

In an effort to meet the spirit of the legislation and increase service capacity, while continuing to promote a comprehensive and customized approach to treatment, the Department suggests that current licensed therapists and counselors be required to receive training, gain supervised experience and earn specific ongoing continuing education units (CEUs) pertaining to assessment and treatment of child trafficking. This would minimize disruption of established treatment relationships and further support a clinician's ability to address the multifaceted needs of children and youth.

The bill would also require DCF to establish criteria of service provision for child anti-trafficking agencies. This would require the Department to dedicate significant resources that are not presently available to develop such criteria, and to conduct site visits to ensure that the proper methodologies are being followed. Further, we are concerned about how the new agency designation may impact upon service capacity.

DCF is committed to working with the proponents of the bill to ensure the final legislation effectively protects and treats the victims of child human trafficking.

The Department thanks the Committee for consideration of this testimony.