



“I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

— Jesus Christ

Date: May 21, 2018

Re: HB 461 – Proponent Testimony

From: Jeff Willbarger, Executive Director of The Daughter Project

Dear Representatives Fedor and Galonski,

I have read and fully support your proposed HB 461 especially as it intends to raise the minimum age of sex trafficking survivors to 18. As you know, I have been the Director of The Daughter Project for 8 years and we successfully operated Ohio's first, licensed recovery home for adolescent girls rescued from sex traffickers for five years here in northwest Ohio. Moreover, we were nationally recognized for our work in 2016 when we were one of five organizations to win the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis award for exemplary community service in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 2016! Since that time, we have added an adult women's component to our ministry.

Briefly, let me say that I have personally met approximately 100 adolescent and adult survivors of sex trafficking. I have also read the stories of countless other children and women. None of these so-called prostitutes and strippers chose to be sex trafficked. Without exception, every one of them had a history of sexual abuse as a child and most were exposed to drug use while living at home. Pimps, pedophiles and sex traffickers then took advantage of them in their vulnerable state and used their history of abuse and exposure to drugs in order to coerce and manipulate them into a heinous form of slavery.

All that I am saying is confirmed by the work of Judge Paul Herbert in Columbus. He founded CATCH Court when he realized that prostitutes are actually domestic violence victims who should be rescued and helped by our community rather than judged and incarcerated. HB 461 would recognize this fact, at least for victims under the age of 18 years.

“One day Judge Herbert saw a woman come into his court with bruises and thought she was a domestic violence victim. However, she was actually a defendant with a charge of prostitution. At that moment, he realized it was hard to tell the difference between a victim of domestic violence and a defendant charged with prostitution. Then, after some research, he was astounded to discover human trafficking was thriving in Columbus and sadly, many women were trapped in a cycle of exploitation and abuse. He created CATCH Court to provide a path of rehabilitation, recovery and support for them.”

I wholeheartedly implore all the members of the Criminal Justice Committee to consider the proponent testimony for HB 461! If they do, then I am hopeful they will support HB 461 without reservation just as I do.

Serving God by serving others,

Jeff Willbarger

Director, The Daughter Project

Helping survivors recover from sex trafficking as a 501c3 non-profit since 2009

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