



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB13
Submitted to the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee
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Chair Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of Advocating Opportunity in support of Senate Bill 13. Advocating Opportunity is a statewide nonprofit organization that provides holistic advocacy and free legal services to survivors of human trafficking. With offices in both Toledo and Columbus, we represent survivors from communities across Ohio.

Advocating Opportunity has represented many Ohio children who have experienced human trafficking. We serve as victim's counsel in the investigations and prosecutions of their traffickers, as well as defense counsel and Guardians ad Litem in Safe Harbor Diversion proceedings in juvenile court. In the interests of those children, we come before you in enthusiastic support of Senate Bill 13.

We commend Senator Fedor in her hard work bringing together all parties presently working to fight juvenile human trafficking in Ohio in the creation of Senate Bill 13. As a result of this time and effort, Senate Bill 13 not only addresses an inexcusable gap in the application of Ohio's juvenile sex trafficking laws, but also ensures that children who are being trafficked and exploited are not treated like criminals in our juvenile courts.

Senate Bill 13 improves outcomes for child victims of human trafficking in juvenile court. Advocating Opportunity is a part of a statewide training circuit, focused on helping counties in Ohio implement and maintain Safe Harbor Diversion Programs. Ohio's Safe Harbor law is being interpreted, often for the first time, in many of Ohio's 88 counties. Safe Harbor Diversion allows children charged with offenses that are related to their trafficking victimization an opportunity to engage in supportive programming rather than face prosecution.

Senate Bill 13 makes a number of small changes to Safe Harbor Diversion that provide improvements to procedures and ensures a streamlined response to juvenile victims of human trafficking in all our juvenile courts. Of particular note is the clarification that a guardian ad litem *must* be appointed as soon as qualifying statutory conditions are met, which ensures a trained professional charged with promoting the child's best interests is involved as quickly as possible. The changes also allow juvenile courts twelve months of diversion programming, rather than the previous nine-month limit, which many advocates found to be too short to meaningfully engage with the youth and link appropriate services prior to case termination.

Finally, Senate Bill 13 acknowledges that by not applying our sex trafficking laws evenly, to all minors, Ohio puts our sixteen and seventeen-year-old children at greater risk for victimization and exploitation. The current law disregards the vulnerabilities to human trafficking that our youth encounter and places a much high burden on a victim as soon as they turn sixteen. This distinction is not rooted in the reality of what our children are experiencing. We ask that you support this bill, recognizing that any child under the age of 18 being trafficked and exploited for commercial sex deserves equal treatment and protection under the law. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 13. If you would like to reach me for additional comment, please feel free to email me at ed@advocatingopportunity.com or call me at 855-855-1945 x705.