

Chairman Eklund, Vice-Chairman Manning, Members of the Committee,

I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on this bill before your committee. Over the last 6 years, I have been serving as the Executive Director of Gracehaven. At Gracehaven, we provide residential and community based services to minor sex trafficking victims in Ohio. Last year we served 86 young people from Ohio who are survivors of domestic minor sex trafficking.

From that perspective, I wish to say that we do not find 16 or 17 year old survivors to be substantively different from younger survivors with regard to the trauma they have experienced or the intimidation related to standing up to a former trafficker. Their fear of repercussions from their oppressors can often result in them choosing to remain silent and victimized rather than speak up and advocate for themselves. Or worse, when faced with the task of justifying their claim of being victimized they can run away from their fears by going AWOL from their safe placement, leaving them even more vulnerable to ongoing exploitation and far from pathways toward healing and hope.

We have first-hand examples where minors who were over age 15 have come forward with detailed accounts of exploitation at the hands of a trafficker, only to have the elements of the legal process being amended by this bill backfire in their case. They were placed in a he said/she said circumstance where the burden of proof is on them to prove what had been done to them behind closed doors or in front of witnesses that were participating in the exploitation. No one was stepping up on their behalf. The effect was to further traumatize the victim, and emboldened and empowered the trafficker's influence in their life.

At Gracehaven, we see that our system works far better for those survivors 15 years old or younger. We also are aware that most other states in our nation have opted to extend those protections to all children under age 18. I commend Senator Fedor for sponsoring this change to Ohio law and advocating for these most vulnerable Ohioans. We believe this bill to be another important step in protecting and caring for our youth. I would add my voice to hers and ask you to help the victims of this horrible scourge in our society by enacting this change for their sake.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this issue.