



Testimony for House Bill 561

State Representative Tracy Richardson, District 86

State and Local Government Committee

December 7th, 2022

Chairmen Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the committee, I am Representative Richardson and I am speaking on behalf of myself and my joint-sponsor Representative Jarrells. We are grateful to you for the opportunity to testify and make a difference in Ohio for all victims and survivors of human trafficking. Specifically, we come before you today to ask for your support for House Bill 561 which Designates January 11th as Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

To designate January 11th as Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Ohio, is to take a stance as legislators against modern-day slavery. Human trafficking victims are exploited sexually and for labor, each day in our Nation, and our State. They are coerced, by force and fraud, to commit tragic acts against their will. Often these victims have no voice, which is why we, as elected officials, must have one for them and support legislation such as this.

In the beginning of this 134th General Assembly, I decided to learn more about the crime against humanity which is known as Human Trafficking with the hope of having a positive impact on preventing Human Trafficking as well as supporting the victims. The journey of my own awareness is the catalyst for this bill. I learned very quickly how little I understood and how important it is to help others learn so that collectively we can work towards positive change in Ohio.

Designating Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Ohio on January 11th will coincide with the National Human Trafficking Awareness Day and will bring attention to an issue often hidden in the shadows. Ohio should be a national leader in fighting against human trafficking, however, we are consistently at the opposite end of this spectrum. Just recently Ohio received an 'F' on Shared Hope International's Report Card. This grade indicates that we have much room to improve when it comes to properly identifying and responding to victims, properly preventing trafficking in our state, and ensuring help for survivors.

Additionally, did you know that there is a National Human Trafficking Hotline or that in 2020, Ohio was 6th in the country for calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline? The city we stand in now, was the 9th highest reporting city. Normally, when we are reporting numbers at the top of the nation, it's something to be proud of, but in this case it indicates a growing need for assistance. This is a problem that needs a light shone upon it.

An awareness day for human trafficking will bring attention to the problem and opposition to modern-day slavery. It will allow an additional opportunity to redefine what many Ohioans believe human trafficking to be, but often isn't.

The Ohio Attorney General's office has noted that people often associate sex trafficking with a stranger kidnapping a young victim and locking them in chains. This perception, however, is only the tip of the iceberg. A majority of traffickers know their victims well and rely on building trust and a close relationship with their targets by identifying the victims' needs and vulnerabilities. They then exploit those vulnerabilities to compel their victims into being trafficked.

The Attorney General's office has also stated: "Labor trafficking, too, is a problem throughout Ohio and the United States. Many people incorrectly believe that only undocumented immigrants are trafficked for labor, but it can happen to those who enter the country legally and to U.S. citizens. Furthermore, labor trafficking can happen within legitimate businesses — construction, food service, agriculture and others — where it hides in plain sight and makes it harder to identify."

Designating Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Ohio will set us on a course to educate Ohioans on the warning signs of human trafficking, lead to improvements in resources for victims and survivors, prevent victims from being recruited or groomed into this lifestyle, and teach our communities how to properly report suspicious activities. An Awareness Day will strengthen our fight against human trafficking and show the victims that we are here, and we care.

As I close, House Bill 561 is not about just another designation day but rather an invitation to awareness and a call to action. Thank you Chairmen Wiggam and the members of this committee for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions you may have and humbly ask for your support.