

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony for House Bill 385 (HB385). My name is Lara Wilken, I am an Assistant Clinical Professor at Bowling Green State University, Co-founder of the BGSU Labor Trafficking Education and Research Initiative, Co-founder of the Erie County Jail's Women's Empowerment Group, and proud Chair of the Ohio Attorney General Human Trafficking Initiative Public Awareness Subcommittee.

As a former sexual assault nurse examiner, I know the critical role healthcare providers play in recognizing indicators of human trafficking. Evidence-based research has shown that nearly 90% of individuals recovered from the life of human trafficking reported that during their time of exploitation, they were seen and/or treated by a healthcare provider and human trafficking was never recognized. Nearly 90%! It is important to note that these numbers do not account for those who have yet to identify. Barriers to identification, include but are not limited to fear of law enforcement and or service providers. Lack of disclosure may be due to fear of being arrested and/or being deported.

Currently, there is a lot of coverage in the news largely focused on sex trafficking, it is important to remember that labor trafficking is a prevalent and equally devastating part of this conversation. Labor trafficking is oftentimes overlooked and underreported, because of this we lack the necessary data and research essential to gaining a true, comprehensive understanding of the magnitude and scope of this serious problem. Traffickers knowing labor trafficking is a well-hidden and equally underreported crime, will not only exploit these individuals for profit; they will also manipulate and force them to commit additional crimes. Crimes that include, but are not limited to, drug trafficking and theft.

In 2022, Ohio was fourth in the nation for calls made to the human trafficking hotline. That is a jump from being 6th in 2020. You will recall the harrowing case from 2014 when children from Guatemala were trafficked into Ohio for the sole purpose of providing labor services. Serving on the board of Eyes Open International, founded by Harold D'Souza, whose family immigrated from India and were forced to work for free in a restaurant in Cincinnati, Ohio, I know firsthand the devastation of human trafficking that exists within our great state. Under the current Ohio law, a criminal record can only be expunged if a survivor has been convicted of soliciting, loitering, or prostitution. These requirements make it nearly impossible for a victim of labor trafficking to qualify for expungement and the chance at rebuilding a new life.

HB385 addresses one of the most important times in a survivor's story, the transition out of human trafficking. Everything from safety, housing, transportation, access to financial aid, education and employment are hurdles made even more difficult if the survivor has a criminal record. As a high school dropout, I personally can relate to some of these hurdles and know the difference that can be made in a person's life if given a chance. HB385 is a critical and essential step in not only breaking down the barriers to identification previously mentioned, but also a critical step in empowering human trafficking survivors to reach their true and full potential. Any increase to access of expungement is a step in the right direction.

I want to thank Representatives Williams and Richardson for bringing forth HB385 and their continued dedication and attention to this issue.