



**Interested Party Testimony- House Development Committee
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget
February 26, 2025**

Chairman Hoops, Vice Chair Lorenz, Ranking Member Abdullahi and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96 in support of Freedom a la Cart's funding request of **\$250,000 per fiscal year through the Ohio Department of Development Local Development Projects line** to deepen impact of and expand our workforce initiatives programs and model which provide human trafficking survivors the support, skills, and resources they need to be productive and successful members of Ohio's workforce.

My name is Paula Haines and I serve as the CEO of Freedom a la Cart.

Over fifteen years ago, Freedom a la Cart began a collaborative partnership with Franklin County Municipal Court's CATCH Court (Creating Autonomy Through Collaborative Healing) specialized docket for human trafficking survivors. Whereas CATCH was providing an intensive probationary program to help victims of sex trafficking, Freedom a la Cart established a comprehensive community-based support program to foster healing and restoration to CATCH participants long term.

At Freedom a la Cart, we empower survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation to build lives of freedom and self-sufficiency. We believe that breaking down employment barriers is vital for creating a pathway to freedom. So, we've created a safe place of restoration where survivors can heal, learn and grow as they prepare for sustainable employment, gain personal independence and reintegrate into our community.

In 2011, the organization purchased a food cart and launched a social enterprise providing survivors with equitable opportunities for employment. Freedom became the vehicle – literally – through which survivors began the ever-important first steps toward self-sufficiency. Today, Freedom a la Cart operates a thriving café, bakery, and catering business which serves as the impetus for the organization's workforce development program and generates 55% of the organization's total revenue.

Human trafficking recovery requires a simple process capable of responding to complexity. It is this complexity that drives our focus on whole-person wellbeing and independence through an approach centered on equity. Each survivor comes with different resources, strengths, and needs. Thus, our support is flexible and personalized to ensure that every person receives what they specifically need to thrive. Our focus is on whole-person restoration by providing trauma-competent, lifelong support across economic, social, and emotional categories, while managing smooth navigation of outsourced services all in one place. This model allows survivors to concentrate and accelerate their recovery, stability and economic mobility.

An estimated 29,100 people in Ohio are victims of trafficking every year. The needs of human trafficking survivors are great. On average, the survivors served by Freedom a la Cart have lived in a cycle of sex trafficking since the age of 13. Most survivors live with significant complex trauma, sometimes including traumatic brain injuries that damage logic and memory. Many survivors in our programs are mothers who have lost custody of their children. In many cases, the cycle of trauma associated with human trafficking leads to interaction with the criminal justice system and, in the most serious and tragic cases, can even lead to death.

This is why we knew we must do something for the long-term health and wellness of survivors.

Last year, Freedom a la Cart served 357 survivors and provided housing assistance to 125 survivors to ensure stable housing and prevent re-exploitation. Since 2011, we have provided job training to over 140 survivors of human trafficking. Among those who started our workforce development program since 2019, **84% have successfully avoided new criminal charges** -- a dramatic contrast to the national recidivism rate of 80% for women in prostitution, where 4 out of 5 face new charges. Freedom is flipping the narrative, one life at a time and, with an investment from the state, we can change more lives and expand this model to other parts of Ohio.

I kindly ask that you support our funding request of **\$250,000 per fiscal year through the Ohio Department of Development Local Development Projects line to deepen impact of and expand our workforce initiatives programs and model which provide human trafficking survivors the support, skills, and resources they need to be productive and successful members of Ohio's workforce.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I will now answer any questions you may have.

Paula Haines
CEO
Freedom a la Cart