

**Opponent Testimony on House Bill 172
House Judiciary Committee
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Collaborative to End Human Trafficking
November 19, 2025**

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 172. My name is Kirsti Mouncey, and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking (Collaborative). The Collaborative's mission is to lead, empower, and connect our community to eradicate human trafficking. As the backbone organization of a 75+ organization of Cuyahoga Counties Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition called Greater Cleveland's Coordinated Response to Human Trafficking, we provide strategic leadership to create social change. I serve as a member of the Attorney General's Human Trafficking Initiative where I Co-chair the Research/Gap Analysis & Data Subcommittee, and I am a member on the Governor's Human Trafficking Task Force.

The Collaborative to End Human Trafficking leads and connects systems-level responses across Ohio to ensure that every individual who has experienced human trafficking has access to safety, healing, and long-term stability. We work closely with service providers, survivor leaders, law enforcement, child-serving agencies, and community partners to strengthen Ohio's capacity to identify and support trafficked youth.

If enacted, House Bill 172 would eliminate the six counseling sessions or 30 days of services that minors aged 14 or above can currently access without parental consent or notification. For trafficked youth, this narrow pathway is not a loophole—it is often the only safe, realistic opportunity they have to reach a trained professional. Closing it would cut off a vital lifeline for youth whose autonomy, communication, and daily movements are often tightly controlled by their trafficker.

I want to emphasize that this is not abstract. In my own work, I have seen youth whose only safe moment to ask for help came in those early counseling sessions. Without that pathway, several of those young people would never have reached the professionals who were able to intervene, report, and stop their exploitation.

HB 172 removes an essential prevention mechanism and undermines the very supports that protect children from further harm. Allowing limited confidential counseling does not weaken families—it strengthens the capacity of professionals to protect children when home is not a safe place.

Requiring parental consent prior to any counseling would place trafficked minors in immediate danger. A significant portion of child trafficking cases involve a parent, guardian, or family member as the trafficker or as someone complicit in the exploitation. Other minors are exploited by individuals who hold influence or control within the home. In these situations, requiring parental consent does not uphold parental rights—it creates an insurmountable barrier to safety, intervention, and disclosure. For a child who is being exploited by a caregiver, seeking that caregiver’s permission for counseling is simply impossible.

Confidential counseling is often the first environment in which trafficked minors feel safe enough to reveal what is happening to them. In those initial sessions, licensed clinicians build trust, assess risk, help youth identify safe adults, and—when appropriate—support them in involving parents or guardians. Counselors are also mandated reporters who are trained to notify the proper authorities, plan for safety, and connect youth with specialized resources as soon as abuse or exploitation is disclosed. Current law allows these critical steps to take place. House Bill 172 would stop these interventions before they can begin.

This bill would also disproportionately harm youth who are at the highest risk of trafficking, including minors in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness or family instability, and young people who have been rejected or forced out of their homes. For many of these adolescents, parental consent is absent, unsafe, or unattainable. Without access to confidential counseling, these young people lose one of the few trauma-informed supports capable of interrupting exploitation and guiding them toward recovery.

Thank you for your time and attention. The Collaborative to End Human Trafficking appreciates the Committee’s commitment to protecting vulnerable children across Ohio. We urge you to consider the profound impact House Bill 172 would have on trafficked youth and on the professionals working tirelessly to support their safety and healing.