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Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 172. My name is Christi Scott Bartman and I am the Founder of Eyes Up Appalachia, an anti-human trafficking initiative operating in the 32 Appalachian counties of Ohio. I provide training and education to regional and state agencies including Children’s Protective Services and Children’s Advocacy Centers, law enforcement, school staff, medical staff, mental health professionals, Juvenile Justice and Juvenile Court staff, churches and students at universities and colleges in the region among others. While doing so, I listened to those in the area to understand what instances of human trafficking they were seeing. The direct service providers with which I spoke were under no false assumption that it looked like someone coming across our Southern border, what they were seeing, in reality, looked more like a parent allowing sexual access to a child in exchange for drugs or rent. **Rather than find safe adults that can help them, HB172 would cut off one of the few lifelines currently available for children trapped in the unfathomable cycle of familial abuse and trafficking.**¹

When we think of human trafficking we do not often think that the person allowing sexual access to a child could be a parent. But far too often that is the reality. Allert conducted a study across juvenile justice systems in 24 states on domestic minor sex trafficking victims, and found that of the 3505 cases, 917 were confirmed as being trafficked by a family member. Of those trafficked by a family member, she found the trafficker to be the biological mother 60.3% of the time and the biological father 33.8% of the time.² Similarly, Sprang and Cole, in a 2018 study of 31 survivors, found minor survivors of familial trafficking were trafficked by their mother in 64.5% of cases and their father in 32.3% of cases.³ The very people that should be protecting these children were trafficking them instead.

¹ Defined as both a biological and legal relationship in Allert, J. (2022). Domestic Minor Familial Sex Trafficking: A National Study of Prevalence, Characteristics, and Challenges across the Justice Process. P. 21. <https://bcfstrafficking.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FamilialTrafficking-Study.pdf>

² Allert, J. (2022). Domestic Minor Familial Sex Trafficking: A National Study of Prevalence, Characteristics, and Challenges across the Justice Process. P. 21. <https://bcfstrafficking.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FamilialTrafficking-Study.pdf>

³ Sprang, G., & Cole, J. (2018). Familial Sex Trafficking of Minors: Trafficking Conditions, Clinical Presentation, and System Involvement. *Journal of Family Violence*, 33(3), 185–196 (p. 189). <https://doi-org/10.1007/s10896-0189950-y>

In 2022, I conducted a study in our Ohio Appalachian Counties with Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers. Though the methodology is not as academically rigorous as those mentioned above, we did have 79 agencies respond for a reported total of 104 individuals identified as being trafficked and 134 as being highly suspected of being trafficked for a total of 238. All counties did not respond so the actual total was likely higher. Of those responses, 111 offenders were identified and of those 18 were mother, father or caregivers, or 16%.⁴

As evidenced by these studies, many survivors lacked familial relationships with adults who would love, support, and protect them. Those that should provide for these needs, instead, met them with abuse, violence, and exploitation. Consequently, seeking permission from these same relatives to receive counseling is contrary to not only the qualitative information I receive from survivors of familial trafficking that advise me, but also peer-reviewed research on the subject.

In 2023 Polaris conducted a study with 257 survivors that identified accessing mental health services as the greatest need both currently and at time of exit from trafficking. Seventy-five percent of the respondents said accessing behavioral health services with providers that understand their trauma was the greatest need at their time of exit.⁵

Taking this option away from youth that face trafficking by a parent or legal guardian will not only make identification more difficult, but it will also make healing more difficult. Those that experience trafficking, particularly as youth, suffer extremely complex trauma. In fact, Chambers, et. al conclude "We have observed that the complex, chronic trauma experienced by survivors who are trafficked at a young age, especially at the hands of those who should be their protectors, imparts a lasting, unique psychological trauma."⁶

Given these findings, it is imperative we address these concerns as soon as possible. Delaying the opportunity for a youth to get mental health assistance when the trafficker is a family member is detrimental not only to early identification, but the start of long-term healing that will need to take place for years to come. The earlier we can allow access to mental health professionals the better. **For the large majority of the cases, parental permission will not be an issue. But for this extremely vulnerable group, the repeal of ORC 5122.04 will be devastating.**

⁴ Bartman, Christi S. (2023) "Second Interim Report of Findings from the Appalachian Ohio Human Trafficking Prevalence Study." <https://www.eyesupappalachia.org/>

⁵ Polaris. (2023). *In Harm's Way: How Systems Fail Human Trafficking Survivors. Survey Results from the First National Survivor Study.* p. 31-32 <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/In-Harms-Way-How-Systems-Fail-Human-Trafficking-Survivors-by-Polaris.pdf>

⁶ Chambers, R., Gibson, M., Chaffin, S., Takagi, T., Nguyen, N., & Mears-Clark, T. (2022). Trauma-coerced Attachment and Complex PTSD: Informed Care for Survivors of Human Trafficking. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 10(1), 41–50 (p. 48). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.2012386>

Voting no on HB172 will give these very vulnerable youth a fighting chance to begin the long process of healing from this unimaginable trauma. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony.