



**Proponent Testimony- House Judiciary Committee
HB 47 — Enact the Human Trafficking Prevention Act
April 9th, 2025**

Chairman Thomas Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 47, the Human Trafficking Prevention Act, which Increases the penalties for kidnapping where the purpose is to engage in sexual activity with the victim against the victim's will or to hold the victim in a condition of involuntary servitude. It also modifies an element of the offense of kidnapping regarding the age of the victim under certain circumstances to apply to victims under the age of 18, instead of under the age of 13. Additionally, it increases the penalty for abduction committed under circumstances involving involuntary servitude or a sexual motivation to a first-degree felony and imposes a mandatory prison term for that offense.

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

At Freedom a la Cart, we empower survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation to build lives of freedom and self-sufficiency, by providing workforce training, wraparound services, and lifelong support from a trusted team and peer 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 57% of the organization's total revenue.

Each year in Ohio, an estimated 29,100 people are trafficked. From 2011 to 2021, our state saw a 43% increase in human trafficking prosecutions and nearly a 50% increase in referrals to U.S. attorneys. These figures show promising progress in holding perpetrators accountable—but the need remains urgent. Ohio continues to rank in the top five states for human trafficking, with a rate of 3.84 victims per 100,000 residents. We can and must do more to reverse that trend.

I have sat across from far too many women who were trafficked as teenagers—some abducted, some coerced, all exploited. One young woman told me how, at 16, she was picked up by an older man she trusted, only to be driven across state lines and held against her will. She said, "I thought he was helping me get away from my bad home life. Instead, he physically separated me from everyone in my life and I was trapped." She was sold night after night. It took her years to escape and even longer to rebuild. She is now employed full-time, living independently, and mentoring others. But the trauma of being kidnapped and used like property lingers. She told me, 'If he had faced a harsher sentence, maybe he wouldn't have done it again to someone else.' That is why stronger penalties matter.

At Freedom a la Cart, we support any legislation that increases penalties for kidnapping as well as increases in penalties regarding engaging in sexual activity against the victims will. I appreciate the leadership and advocacy

from Representative Williams and Representative Santucci on this piece of legislation as these are the types of changes that are needed to start decreasing the trafficking numbers in Ohio, make a meaningful impact, and become a model in anti-trafficking legislation that other states can follow.

I know in my heart that this bill can make a real difference in the lives of survivors—and in preventing others from ever becoming victims.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this committee and will now answer any questions you may have.

Paula Haines
CEO
Freedom a la Cart