

Thank you Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony as a proponent of Senate Bill 183, The Expanding Human Trafficking Justice Act.

I want to tell you the story of a young girl. She was sexually abused and exploited by family members for multiple years, which was accompanied by other trauma. Her self worth and mental health declined over time. She lost her voice and parts of her childhood. She learned to look at herself, other people, and the world around her through the lens of her trauma. At sixteen, she attempted suicide and was diagnosed with PTSD, Depression, and Anxiety. At seventeen, she left home. Already vulnerable due to prior trauma, she fell victim to being sex and labor trafficked by a massage parlor. She was charged with solicitation, but not convicted.

From 18-20, she was involved in prostitution and using substances on a regular basis. Some of these acts were consensual while others were not. At times, she used the money she obtained from these sex acts as payment for drugs she was receiving from a family member who had previously abused and exploited her. She was charged with possession of drugs. At 20, she moved and was exploited by another family member so they could obtain drugs and she continued using drugs. Once again, she was charged with possession. One night, she watched this family member's significant other and two of their friends, point guns at a drug dealer's car after the family member coaxed him to come over to the house they lived at. She received criminal charges related to this incident.

Soon after she found out she was pregnant, she left her family and then not long after that, she left the life completely. She moved to another city and tried to start over. However, due to her criminal history, she couldn't receive housing assistance. She couldn't find employment. She couldn't apply for loans to go back to school. She couldn't receive services from the local trauma recovery center. She gave birth, but couldn't provide for her child and lost custody. She went back to the streets and the life. She gave up and never made it back out.

Many parts of this story, are my story, my experiences. The difference is that I was lucky enough never to be charged with any crimes related to the exploitation and trauma I experienced, even though I could have received multiple charges from the time I was a child. Due to that, I had a completely different ending to my story than the one written above. I was able to get the services and help that I desperately needed from multiple community resources. It wasn't easy and I fell many times, but I was able to build a beautiful life for and with my daughter.

This year, I graduated with my Bachelor's in Social Work. I may not have been eligible for student loans with a criminal history. I am working at Children Services in the county that I live in. I wouldn't have been able to work in child welfare and help families with the unique perspective, passion and experience I bring if I had a criminal history. I wouldn't have healed from my past because I wouldn't have been eligible for the trauma recovery center funds I received to attend trauma counseling and a survivor's group. I may not have qualified for housing assistance and would have been homeless. I would've struggled finding employment. I

could have easily ended up returning to a life that I've known in some ways since I was a little girl because I wouldn't have been able to receive the help I needed. I probably wouldn't be standing here in front of you today as the survivor, advocate, mother and woman I've become.

We can't continue to punish victims for experiences that they didn't choose, especially after they make the brave decision to become survivors. Survivors bring a wealth of insight, knowledge, and experience. Their voices are powerful, but they can only bless communities, workplaces, and other spaces with that kind of perspective if they have a seat at the table, which a criminal history can prevent. Victims deserve a way out when they are ready to leave and when a criminal record follows them, it makes it hard for them not to return to the life that victimized them, to the people who hurt them, because they feel like it's their only choice to survive. Survivors deserve access to services they need to heal, safe and stable housing, and employment. They deserve a life different than the one their perpetrators and experiences led them to believe is all they would ever have and all they were worth. By passing this bill, you can help provide victims and survivors with a better chance at the life they deserve. It is remarkable what survivors are capable of when given the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration.