



## **Sponsor Testimony: House Bill 377**

**Representative Nick Santucci, 64<sup>th</sup> House District**

**House Criminal Justice Committee**

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on House Bill 377, which would enact the Human Trafficking Prevention Act.

This is a bill that I believe to be essential for the protection of Ohioans by increasing penalties for human trafficking, kidnapping, and abduction, in order to achieve justice for victims, to keep sexual predators off the streets, and ultimately to decrease human trafficking activity in Ohio. The bill will also work to protect Ohio's most vulnerable residents by creating extra penalties for crimes perpetuated against minors and those with developmental disabilities.

Ohio has been and continues to be a human trafficking hotspot, due to our state's unique position and infrastructure that makes it easy for human trafficking to go unnoticed, having the nation's highest number of truck stops, an extensive highway system, and proximity to the Canadian border, to name a few reasons.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, Ohio ranked sixth in the nation for the number of cases reported to the Human Trafficking Hotline, with 1,161 contacts.<sup>2</sup> That breaks down to just over 3 cases per day. In 2023, Ohio received an overall grade of "F" on its Report Card on Child and Youth Sex Trafficking from Shared Hope International.<sup>3</sup> Human trafficking is not only a serious crime and abuse of human rights, but also destabilizes a community and creates an environment of insecurity and exploitation. We must act to protect Ohioans, especially our children, from the risk of human trafficking, and to ensure that those who commit these atrocities do not have a second opportunity to do so.

My district, which includes parts of Trumbull County, is being crushed by ongoing human trafficking activity. Since introducing this legislation, I have been more and more disgusted by

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<sup>1</sup> Human Trafficking Front, Human Trafficking in Ohio: Complete Prevention Guide, "Human Trafficking in Ohio," <https://humantraffickingfront.org/human-trafficking-in-ohio/>.

<sup>2</sup> Human Trafficking Hotline, National Hotline 2021 Ohio State Report, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Ohio%20State%20Report%20For%202021.docx%20%281%29.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Shared Hope International, Report Cards on Child & Youth Sex Trafficking, <https://reportcards.sharedhope.org/year2023/ohio/>.

the volume of human trafficking cases that continue to come to light right here in Ohio. To name a few, in March of 2023, raids were made on three spas in Warren and Austintown, Ohio that were suspected to be engaging in money laundering and human trafficking activities.<sup>4</sup> In September of 2023, Attorney General Yost and the Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission led “Operation Buyer’s Remorse,” a statewide effort to arrest those attempting to buy sex and to identify victims, and arrested 160 suspects in a single week. Among these 160 suspects were several who lived in and around my district.<sup>5</sup> These are only a few examples of human trafficking activities that have been discovered not only in Trumbull County but throughout our state.

While the Governor and Attorney General are working to address the ongoing statewide crisis of human trafficking, it is our responsibility as legislators to protect Ohioans within our state borders. We need to send a clear message to anyone participating in these acts that they are not welcome in Ohio. Our constituents deserve to live in an environment that is safe, and where they can raise their children without fear. This bill will help create that safe environment. The increased penalties will keep those who engage in kidnapping, abduction, or human trafficking, either for sex or for forced labor, off the streets, and ensure that those individuals serve a just sentence for their crimes.

I want to thank our law enforcement for the work that they do to combat human trafficking in Ohio, particularly Chief Eric Merkel of the Warren Police Department and all the members of the Valley Task Force, the collaborative law enforcement effort in the Mahoning Valley. They have worked tirelessly to protect Ohioans and their efforts have had a huge impact on our communities.

Chairman Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 377. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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<sup>4</sup> Coordinated Crackdown in Mahoning Valley Targets Human Trafficking and Money Laundering Operation, 03/13/2023, <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Media/News-Releases/March-2023/Coordinated-Crackdown-in-Mahoning-Valley-Targets-M>.

<sup>5</sup> WKBN News, “160 arrested in Ohio human trafficking crackdown: Some local,” <https://www.wkbn.com/news/ohio/160-arrested-in-ohio-human-trafficking-crackdown-some-local/>.