



BILL NO: House Bill 768

COMMITTEE: Courts of Justice Subcommittee - Criminal

HEARING DATE: January 26, 2024

SUBMITTED BY: Megan F. Gerbracht, Psy.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist, The Virginia Coalition Against Human Trafficking and Reset180 Board of Directors member

POSITION: SUPPORT

This testimony is written on behalf of The Virginia Coalition Against Human Trafficking (VCAHT), a coalition of service providers, attorneys, survivor-advocates, and community members working to pass survivor-centered human trafficking legislation in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I am also speaking as a clinical psychologist that has specialized in treating children and adolescents for the past 20 years, and as a volunteer board member of another Virginia-based non-profit, Reset180, that addresses human trafficking needs in Northern Virginia.

VCAHT supports HB768 as it will help reduce the retraumatization of children in confronting those who have exploited them. VCAHT would support the expansion of this relief to adult victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking as well, as the protective benefits that CCTV testimony offers most certainly extend to trauma survivors of all ages.

As a clinical psychologist that specializes in working with children and adolescents I completely support removing all barriers that would prevent any minor under the age of 18 from accessing the opportunity to testify without needing to be in the same room as their abuser. It is my professional opinion that there should be no threshold necessary for any child to pass in order to access this form or testimony if it is desired. The chances of a child or adolescent becoming destabilized and derailed in their recovery are significantly increased by the need to be in the presence of their abuser as well as a courtroom full of others. Despite our best intentions, the need for retelling the details of their abuse in such a setting often adds to the shame and embarrassment felt by the victim and can actually lead to developmental regression as a means of coping. This can delay the progress of therapeutic interventions as well as increasing the common yet excruciating symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder like panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, and increased dissociation.

Another less obvious factor to consider is that victims of abuse often develop what is referred to as a Trauma Bond. Even in cases where the child did not previously have a relationship with their abuser, a common reaction to being abused is the development of a strong bond with the abuser, particularly when there is a well-established power differential in the relationship (like an adult has over a child.) Deconstructing this powerful bond during the process of therapy is a long-term process which can easily be interrupted by re-exposure to the abuser. Feelings of guilt regarding the harm the testimony may cause to the abuser are common as is the potential for rekindled feelings of closeness and affection

towards their abuser. The potential for reintroducing these confusing but powerful feelings for a child who is working hard to break free from such a powerful Trauma Bond can be devastating, if they are even able to bring themselves to testify at all, which is another risk. The likelihood of this delaying or derailing their recovery process is high and such a consequence is unacceptable. Reducing the need for a child of any age to endure unnecessary re-exposure to their abuser is the most humane decision and I wholeheartedly support this bill as written.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions at the email address below.

For questions or technical
assistance contact:
info@vcaht.org

Respectfully,

Megan F. Gerbracht, Psy.D.

Licensed Clinical Psychologist