



February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Senator Wanggaard, Chair  
Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

**Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 946**

*Relating to: the testimony of a child in a criminal proceeding for a human trafficking crime.*

Thank you, Chairman Wanggaard and other members of the committee, for hearing my testimony on Senate Bill 946 today. I also want to thank the members of the Taskforce of Human Trafficking for their work on this crucial issue.

Victims of human trafficking experience trauma that most of us cannot comprehend. That trauma can make testifying in court all the more intimidating, especially when victims know they may have to face their trafficker. For our child victims, this can be particularly difficult. A lot of these children have faced multiple forms of abuse that can impact their willingness and capability to take the stand. We should be thinking of alternative ways to make a child feel safe and comfortable enough to bring justice to these victims.

Currently, a testimony of a child witness under 12 years old, or 16 years old if the interest of justice so requires, in any criminal proceeding may be delivered in another room outside the courtroom while being simultaneously televised in the courtroom if the presence of the defendant would cause serious emotional distress to the child to the point where they could not reasonably communicate and it is necessary to minimize the trauma of the child, which will help obtain the child's truthful testimony. This bill would allow any child under the age of 18 years old to give their testimony in another room other than the courtroom for human trafficking crimes specifically.

Creating an environment for child victims to feel protected while recounting the most painful memories can be what helps them accurately recall all of the wrong done to them and solidify a prosecution. These victims have already been through enough, and making sure they do not have to face their abuser when trying to bring them to justice is just one more thing we can try and do to help them. Thank you, and I will take any questions at this time.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James  
23<sup>rd</sup> Senate District  
[Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov)



## JILL BILLINGS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

### Rep. Billings Testimony in Support of SB 946

Chairman Waanggard and Committee members,

Thank you for holding a public hearing on SB 946. As you can see, this bill has received strong bipartisan support and I would like to thank Representative O'Connor and Senator James for working with me on this important legislation, which will help children who testify in human trafficking cases. The Assembly companion of this legislation has already passed in the Assembly and I appreciate your consideration of this Senate bill today.

Children who are victims or witnesses of human trafficking have experienced a trauma that most of us couldn't imagine. The process of reliving the most difficult moments of their lives in court is incredibly stressful and painful, which is why Wisconsin law has allowed courts to order that the testimony of a child be taken in another room and simultaneously broadcast to the court if this will help the child avoid the emotional distress caused by the presence of the defendant and communicate to the court more clearly. This is an important provision that helps protect children while also supporting the interests of justice by allowing the court to hear the child's full and unimpeded testimony. Unfortunately, current law limits this allowance to children under 16 years old.

SB 946 would expand our current law to allow any child under the age of 18 to testify via video in a human trafficking case when it is permitted by the court. This legislation is inspired by a recommendation of Shared Hope International, which has found that several states, including our neighbors in Iowa, have enacted similar policies allowing all minors victimized by trafficking to testify via video when it is allowed by the court.

This expansion to allow 16 and 17 year olds to testify remotely is particularly important because we know that many child victims are older than 15 and are excluded by the age limits in our current law. The United States Department of Justice found that in 2020, half of all trafficking cases prosecuted at the federal level involved child victims. 89% of those child victims were between 14 and 17 years old and the average victim age was 15. By passing this legislation and allowing these 16 and 17 year olds to testify via video, we will allow the courts to help many more children testify remotely during the prosecution of traffickers.

Throughout the hearings held as part of the Assembly Human Trafficking Task Force, we heard from advocates and law enforcement about how difficult it can be for survivors to testify. Sitting in the same courtroom with an individual who has sexually abused, financially exploited, and emotionally manipulated a trafficked person is harrowing for any victim, but it is particularly overwhelming and distressing for children. Expanding our current law to allow more child victims to testify via video will help victims testify without further compounding their suffering.





---

**JILL BILLINGS**  
STATE REPRESENTATIVE

This will also help law enforcement prosecute these heinous crimes by creating a more stable environment for survivors to provide their testimony.

I hope you'll join me in supporting SB 946, which will help protect child victims of trafficking as they move forward and rebuild their lives.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jill Billings". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Jill Billings  
State Representative  
95<sup>th</sup> Assembly District



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Van Wanggaard, Chair  
Members, Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

FROM: David Earleywine, Associate Director

DATE: February 21, 2024

RE: Support for SB 940, SB 942, SB 945, SB 946, SB 949, SB 954, SB 960, SB 961,  
Human Trafficking

---

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the bishops of Wisconsin, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the following bills being heard in this committee today:

SB 940, Mandatory Training Regarding Human Trafficking  
SB 942, Human Trafficking of Adults at Risk for the Purpose of Commercial Sex Acts  
SB 945, Sex Offender Registration for Certain Crimes  
SB 946, Testimony of a Child in a Criminal Proceeding for a Human Trafficking Crime  
SB 949, Courtroom Supports and Sealing Identity of Child Victims and Witnesses  
SB 954, Creation of a Human Trafficking Council  
SB 960, Instruction on Human Trafficking in Certain Specialty Schools (Barbering)  
SB 961, Human Trafficking Victim Services Grant Program

Human trafficking constitutes one of the gravest offenses against basic human rights and dignity. It preys upon the most vulnerable men, women, and children, who are frequently coerced into performing the most degrading forms of human labor. It denies everything that a civilized society stands for and that Catholic social teaching espouses: the protection of human dignity and human rights; the preferential option for the poor; the call to family and community; the rights of workers; and solidarity.

As of 2022, it is estimated that over 27 million people are victims of human trafficking.<sup>1</sup> This can take the form of sexual exploitation, forced marriage, coerced and forced labor, child soldiers, and more. That number includes more than 3.3 million children. In Wisconsin specifically, the National Human Trafficking Hotline reports nearly 800 cases involving over 1,600 victims with the vast majority suffering from sex trafficking.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery*, (September 2022)  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms\\_854733.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_854733.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Spectrum News 1, *How big of a problem is sex trafficking in Wisconsin?* (April 24, 2023)  
<https://spectrumnews1.com/wi/milwaukee/news/2023/04/19/part-1--how-big-of-a-problem-is-sex-trafficking-in-wisconsin->

The Catholic Church, along with other religious and secular institutions, is involved in combating human trafficking both nationally and internationally. In the U.S., the Catholic Coalition Against Human Trafficking, which consists of about twenty Catholic organizations, was one of the groups that helped draft the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its subsequent reauthorizations.<sup>3</sup> Catholic women religious have been at the forefront of anti-trafficking work.<sup>4</sup> They and countless other lay Catholics reach out directly to persons who are being trafficked to help with housing, transportation, childcare, employment, etc. In Milwaukee, the newly established St. Bakhita House, in partnership with Franciscan Peacemakers Clare Community, provides supportive community housing for women who are seeking to escape sex trafficking. Across Wisconsin, among people of every faith, awareness is growing that sex trafficking is destroying lives and wreaking havoc on families and communities.

The WCC, therefore, applauds those involved with the bipartisan task force for bringing forward these bills. These bills strive to give victims of human trafficking some hope that they will be delivered from their bondage and help prevent others from being ensnared in this violent and degrading world. We strongly urge the Legislature to pass these bills.

<sup>3</sup> The Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking (CCOAH), <https://www.usccb.org/offices/anti-trafficking-program/coalition-catholic-organizations-against-human-trafficking>  
<sup>4</sup> U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, <https://sistersagainstrafficking.org>