



## JILL BILLINGS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

### Rep. Billings Testimony in Support of AB 976

Chairman Spiros and Committee members,

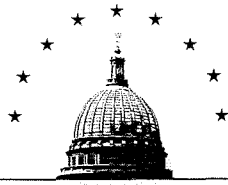
Thank you for holding a public hearing on AB 976. As you can see, this bill has received strong bipartisan support and I would like to thank Representative O'Connor and Senator James for working with me on this important legislation, which will help children who testify in human trafficking cases.

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.

AB 976 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. This will also help law enforcement prosecute these heinous crimes by creating a more stable environment for survivors to provide their testimony.



---

# JILL BILLINGS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

I hope you'll join me in supporting AB 976, 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 cursive script that reads "Jill Billings". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

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



# JERRY L. O'CONNOR

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 52<sup>nd</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 267-9152

Toll-Free: (888) 529-0052

Rep.O'Connor@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953

Madison, WI 53708-8953

## Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

### Assembly Bill 976

### Regarding Testimony of a Child in Child Sex Trafficking Court Proceeding Wednesday, January 24, 2024

Thank you to the Committee Chair and committee members for allowing us this opportunity to address the background for this bill.

Human trafficking is a global crisis. It affects countless lives, including many individuals right here in Wisconsin. According to the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), since the program's inception in 2007, Wisconsin has had 796 human-tracking cases involving 1,640 victims. While those statistics are striking, a [2019 DOJ study](#) found that sex-trafficking data is under-reported, so the true number of victims is likely much higher.

As Chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking, I would like to share a few thoughts on this bill. This bill is a product of the hearings held during the past four months where our Human Trafficking Task Force attempted to better understand how trafficking is affecting our society, especially young people. We learned from agency representatives, DOJ, County DA offices, multiple speakers from local law enforcement, and not-for-profit victim support organizations what a challenge it is to turn the tide of human trafficking in Wisconsin.

This exercise gave us a clear pathway to several bills we could introduce that would have an effective influence and help reduce the level of sex and child sex trafficking in Wisconsin. This is one of those bills and the Task Force recommends it for passage.

Throughout the course of our hearings, the Task Force found that with many potential prosecutions of traffickers are derailed due to a lack of testimony from victims. If victims do not feel comfortable testifying, they are less likely to do so. Additionally, with over 70% of trafficking victims first starting out as minors, prosecutions of traffickers often require testimony from trafficked victims under the age of 18.

AB 976 aims to broaden existing safeguards, specifically for witnesses under 18 years old, in trafficking prosecutions. It grants the court the discretion to allow video testimony, offering enhanced protection for young witnesses. The goal of these additional protections is to shield victims from further emotional distress while also assisting prosecutors in holding their traffickers accountable and bringing them to justice.

This bill is needed, and we ask that the Committee join us in making this a reality for a world that will benefit greatly from your actions.

Thank you to Rep. Billings and Sen. James, our co-authors and co-sponsors and this Committee for assisting us to get this bill passed



**TO:** Chair Spiros, Vice-Chair Schutt and Honorable Members of the Assembly  
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

**FROM:** Ragen Shapiro, Legislative Advisor  
John Elliott, Administrator, Division of Safety and Permanence

**DATE:** January 24, 2024

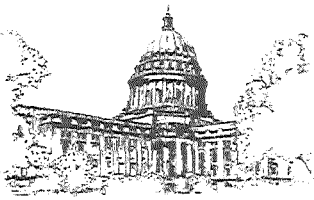
**SUBJECT:** AB-976

---

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is committed to the goal that all Wisconsin children and youth are safe and loved members of thriving families and communities. DCF appreciates the work of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety and the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking to improve the lives of children and families across Wisconsin. DCF is supportive of AB-976 and believes this bill will have a positive impact across the state.

Under the proposed legislation, during criminal prosecution for a human trafficking crime, AB-976, would allow that the testimony of a child witness who is under 18 years of age could occur in a room other than the courtroom. Re-telling a story of abuse can in and of itself be a traumatizing experience for many children and youth. DCF believes strongly that this will assist in mitigating distress and trauma to children who have often suffered multiple traumatic incidents.

DCF appreciates this opportunity to provide commentary and support for AB-976 and commends the efforts of both the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety and the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking in addressing this complicated issue.



# STATE SENATOR LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT

Good morning Chairman Spiros and members of the committee. Thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 976 (AB 976)--which will allow minor victims and witnesses of human trafficking to testify remotely.

For those of us who have been legislating on this issue for years, we have often heard about the immense challenges faced by young victims when forced to recount their trauma in a courtroom setting. AB 976 offers a crucial step towards protecting these vulnerable individuals and ensuring justice prevails.

Forcing a child to confront their abuser in a formal courtroom setting can be deeply re-traumatizing. The fear, anxiety, and shame they experience can significantly impair their ability to provide accurate and complete testimony. Studies have shown that traditional courtroom environments can lead to memory distortion, difficulty articulating experiences, physical and emotional distress, where the experience of testifying triggers anxiety, panic attacks, and even physical symptoms.

AB 976 offers a compassionate and practical solution to this problem by allowing minor victims to testify in a safe and familiar environment, away from the intimidating presence of their abuser. Remote settings, facilitated by video technology, can significantly reduce the stressors associated with courtroom testimony while still satisfying the defendant's constitutional right to confront their accuser.

AB 976 ensures that these rights are fully protected through two-way video conferencing, which allows for full interaction between the child, judge, legal counsel, and the jury. Defense attorneys retain the right to fully cross-examine the child witness remotely. Additionally, child witness specialists can be present to provide emotional support and ensure clarity in communication.

AB 976 is not about convenience; it's about protecting the well-being of vulnerable children while ensuring access to justice for all. By providing a safe and supportive environment for testimony, we can empower young victims to share their experiences without fear, leading to fairer trials and more accurate outcomes.

Once again, thank you to committee members for your consideration of this important piece of legislation, and thank you to my co-authors—Rep. Billings, Rep. O'Connor, and Sen. James for their work on this bipartisan bill.





January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Representative Spiros, Chair

Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

**Testimony on 2023 Assembly Bill 976**

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

Thank you, Chairman Spiros and other members of the committee, for hearing my testimony on Assembly Bill 976 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)



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Members, Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety  
Members, Committee on Workforce Development & Economic Opportunities  
Members, Committee on Jobs, Economy, and Small Business

FROM: David Earleywine, Associate Director

DATE: January 24, 2024

RE: Support for AB-970, AB-971, AB972, AB-973, AB-974, AB-976, AB-978,  
AB-979, AB-980, AB-981, 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 and other Assembly committees today:

AB-970, Sex Offender Registration for Certain Crimes  
AB-971, Human Trafficking of Adults at Risk for the Purpose of Commercial Sex Acts  
AB-972, Solicitation for Prostitution and Providing a Penalty  
AB-973, Mandatory Training Regarding Human Trafficking  
AB-974, Civil Cause of Action for Human Trafficking and Trafficking a Child  
AB-976, Testimony of a Child in a Criminal Proceeding for a Human Trafficking Crime  
AB-978, Creation of a Human Trafficking Council  
AB-979, Human Trafficking Victim Services Grant Program  
AB-980, Displaying a Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline Poster  
AB-981, Instruction on Human Trafficking in Certain Specialty Schools (Barbering)

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

---

<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)





## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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>

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 the Speaker and 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>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->

<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>