



# STATE SENATOR LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT

Good morning Chairman Wanggaard and members of the committee. Thank you for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 942 (SB 942)--which would treat exploitation and human trafficking of an at-risk adult the same way we punish human trafficking of a child.

This bill, which is based on the work of the Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking, acknowledges the evolving tactics of traffickers and expands crucial protections to our most vulnerable populations, especially vulnerable adults.

Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery, tearing apart lives and exploiting individuals for financial gain. While often associated with minors, vulnerable adults are increasingly targeted due to their unique challenges. Mental health struggles, economic hardship, and physical disabilities can limit their options and make them susceptible to manipulation and coercion. Failing to address this specific vulnerability weakens our overall defense against this heinous crime.

This bill takes several critical steps in the right direction by expanding the definition of trafficking to include encouragement or facilitation of exploitation. This recognizes the manipulative tactics used by traffickers who prey on vulnerable adults.

The bill also increases penalties for individuals who engage in trafficking activities near vulnerable institutions like correctional facilities or homeless shelters. This deters criminals from targeting these already vulnerable communities. Finally, the bill recognizes the vulnerability of individuals with mental health challenges, economic hardships, and physical limitations by applying the same legal penalties as someone who targets and exploits minors.

SB 942 is a simple step towards dismantling the insidious web of human trafficking in Wisconsin. It recognizes the evolving tactics of perpetrators, expands protections for vulnerable adults, and strengthens penalties for those who exploit them.

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



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

## Senate Committee on Judiciary Public Safety

### Testimony for Senate Bill 942 Relating to Human Trafficking of Adults for Commercial Exploitation February 21, 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-trafficking 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 thirteen 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.

#### **Creating Penalties for Human Trafficking of Adults at Risk for Commercial Sex Acts**

During the course of our hearings, we continually heard how big the challenge is for law enforcement to secure convictions for some of the heinous acts committed by traffickers against unfortunate victims.

Are there at-risk adults in this world of "the life"? Absolutely. This is probably why law enforcement refers to this activity as the "exploitation of the vulnerable". The traffickers target those individuals who are not popular or willing to partake in dangerous behavior; they could be homeless, or a variety of other descriptions. The traffickers use a variety of enticements to draw in and capture their prey. This ranges from drugs to parties and if the victim has a child, this will become a tool of the trafficker to maintain control. These abhorrent abusers need to be stopped.

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For all of the reasons stated in the co-sponsor memo, we need this bill to give law enforcement and the judiciary the tools that match the crime and remove these dangerous people from destroying more lives than they already have.

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 each of you and our co-authors and co-sponsors. With that, we will be happy to take your questions.

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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

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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>

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<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.

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<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>