



February 21st, 2024

Senator Wanggaard, Chair

Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 949

Relating to: courtroom supports for and sealing the identifying information of child victims and child witnesses of human trafficking crimes.

Thank you, Chairman Wanggaard and other members of the committee, for hearing my testimony on Senate Bill 949 today. I also want to thank the members of the Taskforce of Human Trafficking for their work on this crucial issue.

Being involved in the criminal justice system can be traumatizing no matter what age you are. For children who have been victimized particularly, the idea of having to testify against your abuser can make the experience feel incredibly daunting. These child victims must feel safe and secure enough to want to tell their stories while also understanding what rights they have as victims. That is why courtroom supports that help accomplish these things in a way that is comprehensible for specific age groups are so important. This support for child victims can help mitigate levels of stress while receiving a better understanding of what they are about to experience in the courtroom.

This legislation establishes courtroom supports for child victims and child witnesses of human trafficking that the court finds necessary to support the health and safety of the child. This bill also addresses the vulnerability of the child victim or witness by ensuring the identifying information for the witness or victim in the case is sealed. After conversations with the State Courts, we are working on an amendment to change "sealing" the records, to making them confidential.

We have these resources; what matters is ensuring that the resources get distributed to child victims. We owe it to our victims to protect their privacy and to shield the children from acquiring more stress down the road. If we don't provide the necessary support for child victims in court proceedings, we are opening them up to more harm and neglecting their wellbeing. With this bill, we can help child victims go through this process not feeling entirely alone and in the dark. We can provide the necessary tools for them to speak on their experiences which is absolutely crucial. Thank you, and I'll take any questions at this time.

Respectfully,

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

Senator Jesse James

23rd Senate District

Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov



STATE SENATOR LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6TH DISTRICT

Good morning Chairman Wanggaard and members of the committee. Thank you for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 949 (SB 949)—which improves courtroom and privacy protections for child victims and witnesses of human trafficking.

This bill is part of a package of bills introduced as a result of the findings of the Speaker's Human Trafficking Task Force.

SB 949 is a crucial piece of legislation that prioritizes the protection and well-being of child victims and witnesses caught in the horrific web of human trafficking. This bill recognizes the unique vulnerabilities of these children and implements critical safeguards to ensure their safety, privacy, and ability to participate in the legal process.

This bill takes several commendable steps to safeguard children:

First, it enhances courtroom supports by empowering courts to provide additional, individualized support that tailors the experience to each child's unique needs. This will help reduce anxiety and ensure the effective participation of child victims and witnesses in the court's proceedings.

Second, the bill provides for sealing the identifying information of child victims and witnesses to shield them from public scrutiny and potential retaliation. This will allow these children to participate in human trafficking prosecutions without fear that their involvement will follow them throughout their adult lives.

SB 949 is a simple, yet powerful improvement to our judicial system's handling of human trafficking cases. It empowers victims to seek justice without fear; shields their privacy; and provides the support they deserve.

By passing this legislation, we will send a powerful message that Wisconsin will not tolerate the exploitation of children and stands firmly in their defense.

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. Jimmy Anderson, and Sen. James for their work on this bipartisan bill.



JILL BILLINGS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Rep. Billings Testimony in Support of SB 949

Chairman Waanggard and Committee members,

Thank you for holding a public hearing on SB 949. This legislation has significant bipartisan support and was included in the report from the Assembly Human Trafficking Task Force. I'd like to thank Representative O'Connor and Senator James for working with me on this bill.

SB 949 would protect the identifying information of child victims and witnesses involved in human trafficking prosecutions. This legislation follows a recommendation of Shared Hope International, which has a policy goal of protecting from disclosure in court records the identifying information of child sex trafficking victims.

We heard a great deal of testimony from law enforcement and advocates as part of the Human Trafficking task force about how hard it is for victims to testify, especially when they feel intimidated by their traffickers or afraid for their privacy. This privacy provision also helps victims testify and rebuild their lives without adding to their fears for their own safety, since these child survivors often live in fear of retribution and attacks from their former traffickers.

By keeping the identifying information of these victims private and confidential, we help survivors rebuild their lives without having to feel that these records of the worst thing that has happened to them will follow them, on paper, wherever they go. With the passage of this legislation, child survivors would not have to fear that their experience of being trafficked would be easily discoverable with a google search by future friends, coworkers, and employers. They can be spared the additional trauma of having this information, with their names and information attached, being made public.

This legislation also expands upon current law, which encourages the use of several broad supports for child victims and witnesses in ways that include explanations in a language the child will understand about legal proceedings, referrals to appropriate resources and programs, and other services. SB 949 allows courts to provide child victims and witnesses with additional courtroom supports deemed necessary by the court to help the child and uphold the interest of justice. This legislation does not close the door to any courtroom support for child victims, and other states have utilized similar laws to provide child victims with an emotional support or therapy animal or allowing the child to access a victim advocate.

Allowing child victims to testify more easily will help make human trafficking prosecutions less traumatic for children and help law enforcement get justice and prosecute traffickers in our state. I hope you'll join me in supporting this important bill.



JILL BILLINGS
STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jill Billings
Jill Billings
State Representative
95th 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.¹ 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.²

¹ 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

² 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.³ Catholic women religious have been at the forefront of anti-trafficking work.⁴ 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.

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

⁴ U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, <https://sistersagainstrafficking.org>