



Evergreen
Youth & Family Services
Strengthening Youth. Preserving Families.

March 22, 2023

Dear Chair Wiklund and Members of the Health & Human Services Committee,

Thank you for providing time on your agenda to hear SF 1839. I also appreciate our chief author Senator Dibble along with other members of the committee for being supportive of Safe Harbor and youth survivors of sex trafficking.

I am writing this letter in support of SF 1839 which would provide additional critical resources for some of the most vulnerable people in our state – youth who are being sex trafficked.

Evergreen Youth & Family Services is a community-based organization nestled in northern Minnesota in Beltrami County. We've been serving youth experiencing homelessness, runaways, and families in crisis for almost 46 years in this highly remote and rural region that stretches from Bemidji into isolated and small towns, and across three American Indian Reservations: Leech Lake, Red Lake and White Earth. Many people in our area are faced with persistent poverty, a lack of transportation and living wage jobs, a lack of affordable and safe housing, and so many more disparities. Because of these factors and others, we see the struggle youth and families have with substance abuse, suicide, mental health issues, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. Many of the youth we serve have been sexually exploited and are victims of sex trafficking, or they are at-risk of being victims. We are able to help by providing housing support through our Drop-In Center to youth ages 14-24, along with other resources to provide a safe place for these vulnerable youth to get the help they so desperately need. Our 10-bed Youth Crisis Shelter for youth ages 9-17 is also licensed through the State of Minnesota to specialize in serving sex trafficked, commercially sexually exploited, and at-risk youth. We have housed 30 youth to date through Safe Harbor Housing and more than 40 shelter youth disclose sexual exploitation each year.

Sex trafficking is a horrific issue in our state. In 2019, the Minnesota Student Survey found that 5,000 Minnesota 9th and 11th graders have experienced sexual exploitation. This number is an undercount in that it only represents two grade levels and only the youth who were in school at this time and who felt comfortable answering the question. Minnesota's children and youth should not be bought and sold for sex, and I know it is hard to believe that it happens in our state but it does. The average age of entry into being trafficked is between the ages of 12-14.

The good news is that there is so much hope and support in our state for victims of trafficking. You helped us pass our Safe Harbor Law back in 2011 which decriminalizes "prostitution" offenses for youth under the age of 18 and provides safe and trauma informed services, shelter, and housing programs to help these incredible young people heal and accomplish the goals they have for themselves. We are extremely grateful for this amazing progress, but our youth need more.

On behalf of the Youth Services Network, we are asking for an increase of \$9 million for additional street outreach workers, emergency shelter beds and housing, an additional \$9 million for supportive services such as mental health therapy/CD counseling/educational and vocational programs and an additional \$2 million to expand the Regional Navigator Program. All these investments would provide our state with the opportunity to get additional victims of sex trafficking into safe and supportive environments where healing can happen, and their goals can be realized.

We also know that the Safe Harbor Law No Wrong Door Response works. According to the Wilder Research Center Evaluation conducted between 2017 and 2019 there were a total of 1,279 youth served by Safe Harbor funded grantees. 97% of these youth self-reported positive changes in their life after receiving Safe Harbor services, 100% felt more prepared to reach their educational goals, and 89% felt more prepared to support themselves in a financially safe way.

Please use some of the surplus to invest in the safety and future of young victims of trafficking. Thank you for your support of SF 1839.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ebony Warren". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ebony" being more prominent and larger than the last name "Warren".

Ebony Warren
Executive Director
Evergreen Youth & Family Services