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Rep. Billings Introduces “Safe Harbor” Bill for Sex-Trafficking Victims
Safe Harbor would prohibit the charging of children with prostitution and mandate provision of services

LA CROSSE – Representative Jill Billings (D – La Crosse), along with Rep. La Tonya Johnson (D – Milwaukee), introduced legislation to create a “Safe Harbor” for child sex trafficking victims. The bill, LRB-0733, eliminates the crime of child prostitution from state statutes and requires child welfare agencies to investigate all cases of child sexual exploitation.

“Child victims of human sex trafficking are just that—victims—and should not be treated like criminals for actions that are beyond their control,” said Billings. “Sexually exploited youth need our assistance to escape their captors, but first they have to trust that state authorities are, in fact, the ‘good guys’. Providing a Safe Harbor for these children is the first step towards building this trust.”

The bill prohibits the charging of a minor with the crime of prostitution. By adopting a Safe Harbor law Wisconsin will no longer conflict with the Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which treats coerced children as victims, even if they have engaged in criminal prostitution activity. The bill also aligns the discrepancy in current Wisconsin statutory rape and child enticement provisions which declare children unable to consent to sexual activity.

Under current Wisconsin law, the Department of Children’s and Families is permitted, but not required to investigate reports of child abuse when the abuse is carried out by a “non-caregiver.” LRB-0733 would require an investigation by a child welfare agency, in cases where a child is suspected of being forced to engage in prostitution.

“These victims are in need of safe shelter from their trafficker and appropriate services so that they can safely return to school, their families, and their communities,” continued Billings. “The physical and emotional trauma caused by sex-trafficking is extremely complex and it is our duty to provide these kids the opportunity to heal and reenter their communities.”

Representative Billings, with support from the La Crosse Task Force to Eradicate Modern Slavery, led a Legislative Symposium on Human Trafficking in January which brought activists, non-profit organizations, and trafficking survivors to the State Capital to speak to lawmakers about Wisconsin’s trafficking problem. This legislation is the culmination of this symposium and months of discussions with policy advocates.

Human trafficking has been documented in over half of Wisconsin’s 72 counties, and, according to a study by the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission, 77 minors were identified as having been sex-trafficked during 2013 in Milwaukee alone. Twenty-five of the identified youth were between the ages of 12 and 15.

Safe Harbor became Federal law in 2000 with the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. Wisconsin would become the twenty-third state to enact a form of Safe Harbor for minors, along with a number of Midwestern states including Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan.