

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 554. I applaud Governor Wolf, Senators Greenleaf and Leach, along with those within the assembly who support this effort.

My name is Ellyn Jo Waller and I have been an advocate for victims and survivors of human trafficking for more than a decade, domestically and internationally.

I am compelled to provide this testimony today as the First Lady of the Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia.

Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church is actively involved in issues that plague our community and has joined the fight against human trafficking.

Our commitment to this fight is evidenced by the efforts of our Human Trafficking Awareness Ministry which raises awareness of the issue and supports the anti-human trafficking work of The Greater Philadelphia Salvation Army's New Day to Stop Trafficking Programs.

Over the years, I have witnessed the devastation of this horrific crime against humanity as well as the joy of restoration found in places of safety and compassion.

I have looked into the eyes of minor youth in this country and around the world whose innocence has been stolen and lives devastated beyond belief.

It breaks my heart to know human trafficking is alive and well in our beloved Commonwealth. As recently as October 18, 2017, the Philadelphia FBI arrested a woman as a part of their Operation Cross Country XI, which is an annual law enforcement effort that focuses on intercepting underage human trafficking.

Our commonwealth is in need of a Safe Harbor bill that does not re-traumatize children, is victim/survivor centered and provides funding for traffick-trauma informed programming.

Unfortunately, every day, across our country and around the world, minor victims of sex trafficking are coerced, forced and intimidated into commercial sex work.

Children that are victims of human trafficking under significant duress, participate in various illegal activities including the act of prostitution and the selling of drugs.

Regrettably, these children are treated as criminals and prosecuted for their involvement, without consideration given to the fact that they are forced to do so.

Such treatment serves to reinforce what these victims are told by their pimps and traffickers and strengthens the trauma bonds skillfully developed through brainwashing tactics and manipulation.

Child victims of human trafficking should not be held criminally accountable or subjected to juvenile delinquency proceedings for the act of prostitution or other non-violent offenses, as these offenses were committed as a direct result of their victimization.

Doing so sends a message suggesting that they are responsible in some way for the ways in which they are being violated.

However, we criminalize children by arresting, interrogating and prosecuting them for a crime that was committed against them, not committed by them.

Many states have "stepped up" and established Safe Harbor laws in recent years.

It is my hope that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will join the fight and protect our children by passing SB 554 without delay.