



from HOMELESS *to* HOPEFUL

March 27, 2023

Chair Pinto and Members of the Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN. 55155

Dear Chair Pinto and Members of the Children & Families Finance and Policy Committee,

I am writing this letter in support of HF 1858 which would provide additional critical resources for some of the most vulnerable people in our state-youth who are being sex trafficked.

My name is Rich Melzer and I am the CEO of YouthLink. YouthLink specializes in comprehensive, wraparound services for young people, primarily BIPOC youth, ages 16-24 at the vulnerable age of transition between adolescence and adulthood. Our work fills a critical gap in services in the metro area for youth who are sometimes considered “most difficult to house”, with many of the youth we serve experiencing years of inequity, trauma, homelessness, violence, abuse, and exploitation. We are also a partner in the state’s Safe Harbor Law and No Wrong Door Response. Although we are based in downtown Minneapolis we serve victims of sex trafficking from all areas of the state-inner city, suburbs, rural areas, and tribal communities because unfortunately sex trafficking is happening in all of these communities.

I am also one of the policy committee co-chairs for the Youth Services Network (YSN) which is a state-wide coalition of youth agencies who provide services, shelter and housing for youth and young families experiencing homelessness and/or sexual exploitation.

It goes without saying that Minnesota’s children and youth should not be bought and sold for sex. 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 young - between the ages of 12-14. We see this at YouthLink everyday.

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 happened to be in school at this time and who felt comfortable enough answering the question.



from HOMELESS *to* HOPEFUL

But there is so much hope 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 so 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 of these investments would provide our state with the opportunity to get additional victims of sex trafficking into safe and supportive environments where they can heal and accomplish their goals.

Please use some of the surplus to invest in their safety and futures and support of HF 1858.

Sincerely,

Rich Melzer
CEO
YouthLink