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March 6, 2023

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

I wanted to sincerely thank all of you for providing time on your agenda to hear HF 1858. I also greatly appreciate our chief author Representative Keeler, Chair Pinto along with other members of the committee for being supportive of the Safe Harbor and youth survivors of sex trafficking.

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 Beth Holger and I am the CEO for The Link. The Link is a youth and adult led nonprofit based in north Minneapolis that provides a continuum of services, shelter and housing for youth and young families who are experiencing homelessness, sex trafficking or who are involved in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. We are also a partner in the state's Safe Harbor Law and No Wrong Door Response. Although we are based in north 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 The Link everyday and currently have youth this young in our emergency shelter for sex trafficking victims as we speak.

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. The Link served 158 unduplicated youth victims of sex trafficking in 2022 and we are just one of many Safe Harbor funded grantees across the state.

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.

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.

I also know that this works because I get the opportunity to see it first hand every day and every night. These youth are amazing, inspiring and continue to teach me so much. Please use some of the surplus to invest in their safety and futures.

Thank you all so much for your support,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth Holger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Beth Holger

CEO