



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

February 1, 2024
Committee on Education

Testimony for Assembly Bill 977

Relating to relating to: required human trafficking prevention instruction in certain grades and teacher training related to identifying victims of child trafficking.

Good morning and thank you to Committee Chair Kitchens and other committee members for allowing us this opportunity to address the background for this bill. Special thanks go out to Rep. Stubbs for working together to make a better bill. She has been a pleasure to work with.

This bill is a product of the hearings held during the past five months where our Human Trafficking Task Force attempted to better understand how trafficking is affecting our society, especially young people. We learned from agency representatives, DOJ, County DA offices, multiple speakers from local law enforcement, and not-for-profit victim support organizations what a challenge it is to turn the tide of child sex trafficking in Wisconsin. The Task Force recommends this bill for passage.

You have received a copy of the co-sponsor memo and bill language. I want to focus on a how. How do we reduce sex trafficking before it ever begins?

Studies show that over 70 percent of sex trafficking begins as a minor. These are Jr. High and High School kids. One of our speakers tagged this as the “exploitation of the vulnerable”. The impetus of this bill is to raise awareness and increase our efforts to stop child sex trafficking before it begins.

The bill directs the Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Children and Families, and local school boards to design age-appropriate curriculum to be taught in grades 7-12, as well as all licensed employees, primarily teachers and counselors to go through training related to learning ways to identify child sex trafficking exploitation in the student body.

These agencies have current educational material related to the broader issue of sexual abuse and at-risk behavior. We contend it is necessary to include a targeted child sex trafficking component. This will give an increased awareness to students but just as importantly, the teachers and counselors will gain an increased awareness of how to recognize the students who may be at risk to the enticements of sex traffickers.

This bill will apply critical resources to save our teenagers from being snagged into a destructive life experience that comes with sex trafficking. Please join us in passing AB-977 and the all important impact this legislature can have on the social health of Wisconsin.

Rep. Jerry O'Connor
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February 1, 2024

Assembly Bill 977—Relating to: required human trafficking prevention instruction in certain grades and teacher training related to identifying victims of child trafficking.

Assembly Committee on Education

Good morning, Chairman Representative Joel Kitchens, Vice Chairwoman Representative Barbara Dittrich, and Members of the Assembly Committee on Education. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Assembly Bill 977—Relating to: required human trafficking prevention instruction in certain grades and teacher training related to identifying victims of child trafficking.

First, I would like to thank Representative Jerry O'Connor for his collaboration with me on this critical piece of legislation, which was one of 8 bipartisan bills to be recommended by the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking.

I am in full support of Assembly Bill 977 because it provides us with one of the key elements necessary for a comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy in our state. According to Shared Hope International's state report cards, Wisconsin is currently earning a grade of 'F' for its efforts in addressing child and youth sex trafficking. We cannot continue to have a lax attitude toward educating our students and public instructors on human trafficking and the commercial exploitation of children.

Current law does not set out any requirements for the instruction of pupils or school staff in human trafficking awareness or prevention. This is alarming, especially as human trafficking remains a prevalent issue in our state and nation. In our informational hearings for the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Human Trafficking, we heard shocking testimony to the scale of the crisis currently taking place in our own backyards. Appallingly, in 2021, more than half of all trafficking victims in the United States were minors. Increasing education and awareness for children and the adults charged with their safekeeping will be necessary to dismantle human trafficking networks operating in Wisconsin and across the country.



WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Shelia Stubbs

77TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

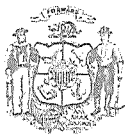
Assembly Bill 977 will require the state superintendent of public instruction, in consultation with the Department of Children and Families, to develop a model curriculum and age-appropriate instructional materials for grades 7 to 12 on human trafficking prevention. Additionally, under the bill, school boards must require full-time school district employees who are required to hold a license issued by the Department of Public Instruction to receive training in identifying victims of child trafficking.

As legislators it is our job to serve the people of Wisconsin and ensure our communities are safe, just places to live. We have a duty to protect our children from the existential threat that trafficking poses to their safety.

I appreciate you listening to my testimony today in support of potentially lifesaving human trafficking education for Wisconsin pupils and educators. I ask that you vote yes for Assembly Bill 977 because by mandating that human trafficking awareness and prevention be included in curricula across our state, we will save kids from future victimization. I am happy to answer any questions.

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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Education

Senator André Jacque

February 1, 2024

Chairman Kitchens and Committee Members:

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 977, which requires human trafficking prevention instruction in grades seven through twelve, and teacher training to help identify victims of child sex trafficking. I am pleased to join Rep. O'Connor in bringing this legislation forward as the Senate lead and author of the companion legislation, Senate Bill 958.

Human trafficking is not only a major concern in Wisconsin, which serves as a hub for the entire Midwest due to its interstate corridors, but studies show that over 70 percent of sex trafficking begins while the victim is a minor. As several Internet Crimes Against Children investigators have relayed to me, pimps seek out victims to exploit when they are most vulnerable, and while Wisconsin has closed several loopholes abused by perpetrators in recent years, those reforms have focused more on aiding the effectiveness of prosecutions of predators than aiding the awareness of those being solicited.

This legislation is an excellent opportunity to foster awareness and increase our efforts to stop child sex trafficking before it begins. Sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of minors are among the worst forms of child abuse, and according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in 10 youth will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday. However, many of these children will live with this secret for months or years, or may never tell someone what happened to them.

This bill requires the state superintendent of public instruction, in consultation with the Department of Children and Families, to develop a model curriculum and instructional materials for grades 7 to 12 on human trafficking prevention. While it is unclear how many other states many have a specific curriculum requirement to the one proposed by AB 977/SB 958, it should be pointed out that 38 states, including our neighbors Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota, already have similar information communicated within broader K-12 child sexual abuse training and curriculum requirements from having adopted Erin's Law or its equivalent.

While Wisconsin has not yet adopted Erin's Law, which I introduced earlier this session with Rep. Gundrum as separate legislation (2023 SB 437/AB 452), this bill would act in concert with that legislation and likely lead to the significant additional reporting of trafficking and abuse seen in other states after adoption of similar training and curriculum, as child victims who do come forward often report their abuse to educators, making it especially important school personnel be trained on how to notice and report child sexual abuse.

Because 90 percent of child sexual abuse victims know their abuser, adults – including parents, teachers, caregivers – must take responsibility for protecting the most defenseless among us by learning to recognize the signs of abuse, and save these young victims. We also need to teach our children to recognize dangerous predators who seek to exploit them.

That's why this bill not only directs the Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Children and Families, and local school boards to design age-appropriate curriculum to be taught in grades 7-12, but also requires all licensed employees, primarily teachers and counselors, to go through training related to learning ways to identify child sex trafficking exploitation in the student body.

I am pleased the Legislature, on a bipartisan basis, is recognizing the need for the State of Wisconsin to combat child sex trafficking. This effort is about putting an end to this exploitation in our state and protecting the innocence of our children, as well as providing a safe environment for students to become aware when they are being exploited and abused and that there's the ability to come forward to somebody that they trust.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 977.



February 1, 2024

Assembly Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2023 Assembly Bill 977**

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) extends its thanks to Chair Kitchens and the committee for this opportunity to offer testimony in opposition to Assembly Bill 977 (AB 977).

DPI supports and is collaborating with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) on efforts to raise awareness and reduce the incidence of human trafficking. As Tom McCarthy, DPI Associate Deputy State Superintendent, explained in his testimony before the Assembly Speaker's Taskforce on Human Trafficking, "[t]he department and education community are situated within a greater context of statewide efforts to combat human trafficking. Our role - in a big-picture sense - is to accomplish three goals with our anti-human trafficking efforts: to build understanding and awareness among adults, to educate and raise skills among our learners, and to support and protect youth at risk or who are experiencing trafficking."

AB 977 requires the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, in consultation with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), to develop a model curriculum and instructional materials for grades 7 to 12 on human trafficking prevention. The model curriculum and instructional materials must be age-appropriate at each grade level and must include instruction on Internet safety. Under this provision, DPI will incur additional costs to develop age-appropriate model curriculum and instructional materials on human trafficking. AB 977 does not provide any funding and assumes the department has relevant experience designing human trafficking prevention materials. We do not currently have that expertise.

This requirement is, however, duplicative of work we are already doing. DPI is working to weave human trafficking information into existing academic standards wherever possible. We will soon update our Wisconsin Standards for Health Education to include learner targets around human trafficking prevention at age-appropriate levels. We also continue to promote training with DOJ, which includes important information on Internet safety as required by AB 977. Further, DPI provides website resources for schools to support teaching on the topic of human trafficking.

AB 977 would become effective beginning in the 2024-25 school year. Each school board would be required to provide age-appropriate instruction in human trafficking prevention in grades 7 to 12. The instruction must be consistent with the model curriculum (or substantially similar curriculum). Mandating that school districts include instruction in human trafficking prevention in grades 7 to 12 beginning in the 2024-25 school year is problematic in several regards. School districts have already set their course offerings for the next school year. It is not feasible to impose such a sweeping mandate with less than seven months until the new school year. In addition,

school districts are facing unprecedented funding and teacher shortage challenges. It is difficult to put another mandate onto K-12 without removing something or funding it. AB 977 does neither.

Under the bill, school boards must require full-time school district employees who are required to hold a license issued by DPI to receive training in identifying victims of child trafficking. This part of the bill is redundant with current practices. Under Wisconsin law, all school staff are required to receive training provided by DPI in the mandated reporting of child maltreatment, which includes identifying victims of trafficking and how to respond with a report to Child Protective Services or law enforcement. DPI's Anti-Human Trafficking resources web page provides additional information on training opportunities and resources at both the state and national levels.

To conclude, we appreciate the intent of the authors and welcome a continued conversation about how schools can play a role in human trafficking prevention, but we cannot support the proposal as before this committee today. We urge you to slow down, continue working with all of the impacted parties, and work to a solution that centers kids through reasonable changes.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov or (608) 264-6716.

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Message

Representative Kitchens

I had planned to be in Madison this morning for the public hearing to speak in favor of Assembly bill 977 but illness has prevented attendance in person. As alternate I am submitting my opinion to your office for consideration.

I am president of the Faith Coalition Against Sex Trafficking in Waukesha County and we are in favor of Assembly bill 977 which requires development of a HUMAN TRAFFICKING PREVENTION MODEL CURRICULUM for grades 7 to 12. Bill 977 indicates that the curriculum include instruction related to Internet safety. I would add to this description "social media platform safety", and I would ask that the curriculum be standard training for school districts with parental permission to opt their child out of the training if so desired.

The Faith Coalition's Mission includes heightening awareness around human sex trafficking and child sexual exploitation by educating children, adults, and families to keep them safe. We are members of the Waukesha County Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force Prevention and Awareness Work Group.

As such, one of our focused tasks is looking for every opportunity to teach kids and parents about trafficking and social media safety. There are other organizations like us that are doing the same in other parts of the state. Many of us have put together and shared age-appropriate awareness programs and are doing all we can to provide programs to students and staff at our high schools and middle schools. But it is not enough as there are not enough volunteers to create the required relationships and experience to do the required training in every school district in our County. There are 13 school districts in Waukesha County. In summary we cannot reach kids and parents fast enough.

Yesterday, heads of the largest social media platforms were brought in to testify before Congress about lapses in their platforms to keep kids safe. It was clear in the exchange that social media companies are not doing enough to make their platforms safe for youth and that movement to require them to do so has been stymied for years.

On Tuesday, of this week in advance of the hearing, the National Center on Child Sexual Exploitation held its own hearing giving opportunities for those who have been exploited through social media platforms or whose children have been exploited through social media an opportunity to be heard. It is important to know that the bad actors that are exploiting our children are doing so from all over the world. Not just from our communities, Wisconsin, or even the United States.

The testimony I heard on Tuesday was devastating. A mother, who has made it her mission to expose the cracks in social media created an account as a 13-year-old and was immediately inundated with pornography and suicide ideation. Another parent talked about his son who within the timeframe of 12 midnight and 3am was so bullied by a group in Nigeria posing as a girl, took his life believing there was no way out. A third talked about

being groomed at the age of 9 with violent pictures of sex acts which he came to believe was normal which set him up to be groomed for trafficking and pornographic videos. Now as an adult with his own child, Images of him are still floating around the internet.

In 2023 alone, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children received more than 36 million reports of sexual exploitation of children online. How many incidents were not reported?

Sadly the companies providing these social media platforms will not be making them safe anytime soon. To keep our kids safer in our culture that is steeped in social media, we need to take bigger steps to make our kids and parents savvy and safer through education and awareness. We as volunteers can't do it alone.

Debra Schneider

President and Coordinator - Faith Coalition Against Sex Trafficking Waukesha County

Member Waukesha County Anti Human Trafficking Task Force

Member St James Good Shepherd Faith Advocates Against Sex Trafficking

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