



**TO: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety**  
**FROM: Nila Grahl, Manager, Racine & Kenosha Child Advocacy Centers, Children's Wisconsin**  
**DATE: Thursday, June 1, 2023**  
**RE: Support for AB 48 – Prosecuting or adjudicating delinquent a person under the age of 18 for committing an act of prostitution**

Chairman Spiros and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. Today, I'm here to share Children's Wisconsin's (Children's) strong support for this bipartisan legislation. On behalf of Children's, I'd like to thank the bill authors, Representatives Kitchens & Billings and Senators James and Johnson, along with members of the committee who have cosponsored this proposal.

Children's is the region's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. As such, we offer a wide array of programs and services inside our hospital and clinic walls and out in our communities. Between our hospitals in Milwaukee and Neenah, primary, specialty and urgent care clinics and community services offices across the state – we provide kids and their families with care and services they need to promote health, safety and well-being. While today my remarks will center on care and services we provide to children who have suffered abuse, assault, neglect and trauma – I do want the committee to know that Children's also offers several upstream, prevention-focused programs and services across the state to help support parents with education and resources, abuse awareness & education for the general community and community professionals, and so much more.

Children's oversees one of the largest hospital-based networks of child advocacy centers, also called CACs, in the country. Children's operates 7 of the state's 15 child advocacy centers in Eau Claire, Kenosha, Wausau, Milwaukee, Racine, Elkhorn and Neenah. We also provide medical staff at three other CACs across the state in Waukesha, Green Bay and Saukville, and offer our Milwaukee hospital-based child advocacy consult service. CACs bring together a team of specially trained professionals who evaluate and investigate potential cases of child abuse and help children and families get the care and support they need. CACs are child-friendly spaces that are designed to help children feel safe and comfortable.

Trained providers complete comprehensive, developmentally-sensitive, trauma-informed medical assessments and care for children who are suspected of being abused. Forensic interviewers provide children with a safe space to tell their story by asking non-leading, unbiased questions that meet forensic standards. Importantly, care providers in the CAC are there to answer questions, offer guidance about next steps and provide referrals for ongoing care, counseling and other care the child and family may require. The CAC team works together to ensure that the evaluation of an abuse allegation minimizes the re-traumatization of a child. We collaborate closely with law enforcement and Child Protective Services to ensure, as often as possible, that a child only has to be seen and tell their story once. Our work helps to start the healing process for children and their caregivers. A CAC's mission is to promote and foster safety, healing and justice for children and families. Without effective therapeutic intervention, many children who have experienced trauma may suffer ongoing or long-term adverse social, emotional, developmental and health outcomes.

When there is a concern for child maltreatment for a patient at Children's Wisconsin, specially trained physicians, nurse practitioners and social workers provide consultations when there are concerns for physical abuse, medical child abuse, neglect, sexual abuse/assault and sex trafficking. Consultations to the Child Advocacy team may consist of a range of responses appropriate to the concerns, such as phone advice, review of records or images, or a comprehensive in-person evaluation. Our multidisciplinary team provides diagnostic assessments and treatment recommendations. When appropriate, we offer assistance and guidance to

children and caregivers in understanding the medical and social issues that have prompted their involvement in an investigation of suspected child maltreatment.

In 2022, nearly 6,400 kids were cared for at Children's CACs, medical satellite locations and through our hospital-based child advocacy service. Of those seen at Children's CACs in 2022, 36 youth had known experiences of trafficking – yet we know that trafficking and exploitation is often underreported. Milwaukee's Anti-Human Trafficking Coordinator, a Children's staff member, received referrals for 92 unique youth in 2022, which represent cases where community partners are seeking multidisciplinary teaming, case consultation, reporting guidance and/or support for resource referrals for a sex trafficking or exploitation concern or knowledge that trafficking or exploitation has occurred. According to the latest Department of Children & Families report, between 2019 and 2021, there were more than 1,350 allegations of child sex trafficking in Wisconsin, of which approximately 30% occurred in Milwaukee County. In this same time frame, child welfare agencies found approximately 270 substantiated allegations of sex trafficking statewide.

Child victims of sex trafficking are on average approximately 13-years-old when they experience deception by an exploiter and are sold, coerced or forced into sexual exploitation. Often times, children have a history of physical or sexual abuse or neglect prior to being trafficked. Traffickers, which may be relatives or present themselves as friends or romantic partners of youth, exploit these prior traumatic experiences and recruit or coerce them by deceiving and threatening them or their families – financially, physically with violence or abduction, and through the use power and control – leaving youth vulnerable and in a challenging situation to escape. Helping care and support children who have experienced sex trafficking requires specialized services and safety supports, along with adequate physical, mental and social care.

Last year, our team cared for a youth who traveled from out of state and was presently living in Wisconsin to attend a specific treatment program for trauma. During treatment, she disclosed to her therapist exploitative incidents by her stepfather and online boyfriend, not realizing what had happened to her in her home state was trafficking. When the therapist offered resources and information about Children's and the forensic interview process, the youth was concerned about getting in trouble for what her exploiters told her was "prostitution". While her home state has safe harbor legislation, Wisconsin (where the interview was taking place) does not. Ultimately, she decided to proceed with the interview when assured that youth victims in her home state had legal protections. With the support of her team, she also chose to cooperate in providing other supporting evidence which led to an investigation of her two traffickers. She was able to continue on in her treatment program and receive the essential support needed to process the traumas that were precursors to being trafficked as well as the trafficking itself.

Child victims of sex trafficking are indeed victims – these are minors who cannot consent to sex and have been exploited and deserve to be protected. Youth victims of sex trafficking need supportive health care, services and support – not fear of being charged with a crime. Unfortunately, sometimes the juvenile justice system is the only place youth are engaging with formal systems. Instead of prosecuting them, youth should be met with the specialized resources they need to obtain physical and mental health care treatment, legal advocacy and support healthy reintegration into society. This may help avoid scenarios where traffickers are able to reach their victims as soon as they're released from law enforcement and reduce their access to services and care. By removing the ability to charge youth with a crime, we can recognize that adults purchasing sex from minors is exploitation and abuse and the focus is on the perpetrators of the crime. This change will protect minors from being criminalized for being victimized and better align with the child sex trafficking statute. Similarly, knowing they cannot be charged with a crime may encourage youth to seek support and report their trafficker – helping to move toward healing and end the cycle of abuse for themselves and for others.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Children's Wisconsin's support for this important legislation that would better support youth victims of sex trafficking to access the care, services and safety they deserve. We encourage your support of this legislation and our team is happy to answer any questions now or in the future.

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*Children's Wisconsin (Children's) serves children and families in every county across the state. We have inpatient hospitals in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley. We care for every part of a child's health, from critical care at one of our hospitals, to routine checkups in our primary care clinics. Children's also provides specialty care, urgent care, emergency care, dental care, school health nurses, foster care and adoption services, family resource centers, child health advocacy, health education, family preservation and support, mental health services, pediatric medical research and the statewide poison hotline.*