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**CONGRESSWOMAN SHEILA JACKSON LEE OF TEXAS**

**CHAIRWOMAN OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM,  
AND HOMELAND SECURITY**

**STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 2601, THE “NATIONAL  
TRAFFICKING HOTLINE ENHANCEMENT ACT”**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

**NOVEMBER 2, 2023**

- HR 2601, the National Trafficking Hotline Enhancement Act, may appear to be a meaningful step towards addressing human trafficking in this country. But sadly, it is not.

- This legislation would require any entity that operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline to provide information received through the hotline to state and law enforcement upon their request.
- While I initially believed the proposed change would be useful in the fight to end human trafficking, I now know that it could adversely affect the central purpose of the hotline.
- In the days leading up to this markup, I and my staff have heard from countless victims and survivors of human trafficking, survivor advocates, and those individuals who work closely with victims and survivors of human trafficking to provide them with the services and support they need. And they tell us that this bill is not something they want or need.
- Operated by the Polaris Project, a nonprofit organization, since 2007, the National Human Trafficking Hotline serves a vital role for victims and survivors of human trafficking.

- This toll-free, 24/7 crisis, call center connects victims and survivors of human trafficking with anti-trafficking services and support across the country, including emergency shelter, medical and mental health care, case management, legal services, and support. The hotline's trained specialists provide information and service referrals using a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach.
- Section 7105 of Title 22, which governs operation of the hotline, directs the Department of Health and Human Services to make grants for a national communication system *to assist victims of human trafficking in communicating with service providers.* Full stop.
- Despite there being no statutory requirement to operate as a tipline for law enforcement, the hotline has served dual purposes for most of its existence – connecting victims and survivors to services and receiving tips about potential trafficking situations.

- Under the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, Polaris agrees to notify law enforcement agencies of potential cases of human trafficking in instances when: a potential victim is in imminent danger; a potential victim is under the age of 18; or a potential victim directs the hotline to do so either personally, anonymously, or through a family member, friend, healthcare professional, or other close acquaintance.
- Polaris has consistently reported 25 to 30% of all calls to law enforcement since 2015 when they first began collecting this data.
- This legislation is not the improvement we thought it was. Survivors, advocates, and service providers support the hotline's existing protocols, which give victims and survivors the power to decide how to and if to involve law enforcement.

- Even the perception that the hotline is required to share information with law enforcement, *even third-party tips*, would have a chilling effect on victims and survivors of human trafficking reaching out for help.
- H.R. 2601 would only result in fewer victims and survivors calling the hotline to access the resources they need – which has always been the purpose of the hotline.
- Victim-witness cooperation is essential to the successful prosecution of trafficking cases. Many victims *want* to engage with law enforcement, particularly after having received clear information and resources from the hotline. But, at their own pace.
- The hotline’s policy of securing consent from the victim or survivor - even when a third-party calls in a tip - helps bring a sense of control back to trafficking victims and enables them to make informed choices about whether to participate in a prosecution.

- If fewer victims call the hotline for fear of an unwanted interaction with law enforcement, then fewer people will make the decision to come forward to law enforcement at a later time.
- To combat human trafficking and truly support and empower victims and survivors of human trafficking, we must prioritize their needs, involve them in decision-making processes, and resist the urge to tell them what is best for them.
- Nearly 100 individuals – most of whom are survivors – and nearly 50 national and local organizations have voiced their opposition to H.R. 2601, including the U.S. National Advisory Council whose members are appointed by the president.
- It is my hope that we can all come together in a bipartisan fashion – as we always have on this issue – and find a solution that is victim-centered, trauma-informed, and helpful to law enforcement.