



Testimony on H.603
Auburn Watersong, Policy Director
March 27, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this comment on House Bill 603. The Vermont Network strongly supports passage of this bill.

Section 1 of this bill recognizes that the threat of harm, coercion and deception can affect consent in an intimate relationship, and that such dynamics of abuse should be credited as such.

Section 2: Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery. It happens across the nation, and right here in Vermont. In 2017, the programs of the Vermont Network served 57 victims of sex trafficking. According to the Polaris Project, almost 21 million people around the world are denied their freedom by this multi-million dollar industry.¹ Our Network member programs have worked with victims who were forced and coerced into sex for money, survival, and basic necessities such as housing. These victims include GLBTQ youth exchanging sex for a night of shelter, victim parents exchanging sex for rent, and victims forced by abusive partners into commercial sex acts for money to pay for basics, for drugs, and for housing.

The nexus between victims of sex trafficking and sexual assault is clear. In 2015, Vermont chose to protect the child custody rights of victims of sexual assault by ensuring that victims who conceived a child by sexual assault would not ever have to share custody with their assailant. Our statute, §665 of Title 15, is based upon the federal *Rape Survivor Child Custody Act*, which was originally introduced by Sens. Brown (D-OH) and Ayotte (R-NH) and passed as an amendment to the *Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015*, a comprehensive and bi-partisan human trafficking bill.

In Vermont, we can do more to ensure that we are affording victims of sex trafficking the rights we afford sexual assault survivors. One such step in that direction is to allow courts to award sole parental rights and responsibilities to one parent and deny all parent-child contact between the other parent and a child if the court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the moving parent was trafficked by the nonmoving parent.

Section 3: 15A V.S.A. § 3-504

Likewise, the Network supports the proposed change within the Adoption Act (Title 15A) which, in keeping with §665 of Title 15, allows the mother of a child that was conceived through sexual assault to seek court-ordered termination of the parental rights of her assailant with regard to that child.

Thank you.

¹ See: polarisproject.org