

Chairman Heinert and members of the committee. My name is Lowell Hochhalter, and I am here today and stand in favor of **Senate Bill 2330**. I am here representing The LifeGuard Group, a non profit organization working to eradicate human trafficking in the United States, and the hundreds of survivors and victims that we have walked with in their journey to recovery.

In front of you today is a Bill that carries with it the potential to alter the lives of generations that come after us. Human Trafficking is not a new problem. For far too long, we as Americans, have ignored the red flags of sexual exploitation of children, and adults. We have turned a blind eye to the trafficking on individuals for sex domestic servitude, debt bondage, and slavery. And we have shrugged off the responsibility of aggressively protecting our children.

Educating students about human trafficking in middle and high school is essential. Knowledge empowers students to recognize the signs, understand the risks, and make informed decisions about their safety. Adolescents are at a critical age when they begin navigating more independent environments—both online and offline—and may become vulnerable to predators. By raising awareness early, schools can provide students with the knowledge and resources they need to protect themselves and others from exploitation. Furthermore, this education fosters empathy, helping students understand the global and local impact of human trafficking while encouraging a sense of social responsibility. Ultimately, early education equips students with the tools to proactively prevent trafficking and advocate for victims, contributing to safer communities and a more informed generation.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the average age of an individual recruited into sex trafficking is between 12 and 14 years old. In the United States, 45% of victims are trafficked by a family member, while 40% are trafficked by someone with whom the victim has a close relationship. These dynamics create barriers for children caught in these horrific situations. Questions such as "Who can I tell?", "Will they believe me?", and "Will they help me?" often arise.

- 95% interacted with Law Enforcement
- 70% used the hospitality industry
- 88% sought healthcare
- 70% came in contact with an educator

Out of these listed industries, only ONE gives direct access to potential victims in a preventative manner: education.

70% of trafficking victims have stated that they came in contact with an educator during their time of exploitation. As a parent of four children myself, I understand the pressures this might add to an already stressed educational system. However, our current situation in which millions of trafficking victims in our country and hundreds of thousands of children being bought and sold for sex requires us to take a more aggressive/proactive approach to educate, empower and equip our students with the knowledge to protect themselves and their peers. In my 15 years in the anti-trafficking field, I have witnessed a growing need to engage students in this conversation. As a society, we must equip our kids with knowledge, empower them with solutions, and enable them to thrive in a world where they can feel safe. Since 2010, I have been involved in presenting school assembly programs aimed at achieving this goal. We sought to lift the dark veil that surrounds the realities facing kids across America, with

the belief that we could empower students to protect themselves and their peers. We have spoken to thousands of students, and in every school assembly, at least one student or staff member has identified a trafficking scenario. In 2013, 2014, and again in 2015, our team visited schools across our great state. In April 2014, we embarked on what we called "The Bakken Tour." We started our tour right here in the Capitol city of Bismarck, at Century High School. We spent the next week traveling across the state to Minot, Williston, and Dickinson, finishing in Mandan. We spoke in Public and Private schools alike. Our visit to Williston was particularly impactful. After our school assembly program, we waited, as is our common practice, until every student exited the gymnasium. It was not uncommon for students to come to our presenters, especially the woman who spoke as a survivor. There was a young lady that stood to away from everyone else. She didn't approach us until everyone had left. She said, "Thank you for being here today, it means a lot." We invited her to come back to the evening community rally, but she said she would not be able to. We urged her to really try and come. Her head dropped and your voice broke as she told us that she had to get home right after school. At 11 she lived in a trailer house by herself. Her father worked in the oil patch and lived at one of the man camps. Her father would sell appointments with his daughter to other men in the camp. That day, was the one chance that little girl had to expose the hell that she had been living with for so long. The school counselor took her and her journey of healing and recovery began.

It was Mahatma Ghandi who said "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable." Kids are vulnerable, simply because they are kids. I urge this committee to send this Bill forward

with a resounding affirmation for approval. Thank you for your the opportunity to be in front of you today.