

**Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on
Senate Bill 851 and the Safe Harbor
for Child Victims of Human Trafficking**

Tuesday, September 29, 2015

**Opening Statement of Committee Chair,
Senator Stewart J. Greenleaf**

I would like to welcome everyone to today's hearing on Senate Bill 851 and the Safe Harbor for child victims of human trafficking. I thank our witnesses who have taken the time to prepare their testimony to advise the committee on this issue. Some of you were unable to access your offices during the recent papal visit, but you remained in contact with my office and we appreciate your hard work on this important issue.

Today's hearing focuses on some of the most vulnerable crime victims imaginable. All across this Commonwealth and the nation, there are girls and boys under the age of 18 who are sold into modern-day slavery by sex traffickers. They often come from broken homes, and traffickers groom and manipulate these victims into believing that the trafficker will provide comfort and protection. Instead, the traffickers brand these victims with tattoos, ply them with drugs to endure long days in the sex trade, and even convince the victims to recruit new sex workers.

Last year, I introduced Senate Bill 75 after extensive consultation with many experts on human trafficking, including a committee assembled by the Joint State Government Commission and some of our witnesses here today. Signed into law as Act 105, that legislation more clearly defined sex and labor trafficking, increased the fines and penalties for trafficking, implemented participation in the national human trafficking hotline, increased training for first responders, and expanded resources available to victim service providers. But more needs to be done.

Prosecutors, defense attorneys, and victim advocates all agree that these victims have endured extensive psychological damage and should not be prosecuted in the juvenile justice system. But here's the challenge: trafficking victims have been so traumatized that they often run away from treatment providers, choosing instead to return to the sex trade.

Victim Advocates, who played a significant role in drafting Senate Bill 851, urge us to make treatment voluntary so that victims can be empowered to make their own decisions about how to get help. Prosecutors, on the other hand, argue that these victims cannot make healthy decisions for themselves. The prosecutors would prefer to have some method of compelling these victims to stay in treatment until the victims can make decisions for themselves.

I am confident that we can find some middle ground. I look forward to hearing how Senate Bill 851 can be used to provide the most hope for these unfortunate children.