August 2024 AMWA-PATH Position Against the National HT Hotline Enhancement Act (HR 2601)

AMWA-PATH (American Medical Women's Association - Physicians Against the Trafficking of Humans) would like to advise the 118th Congress against passing the **National Human Trafficking Hotline Enhancement Act (HR 2601)** into law which, among other things, requires the hotline to disclose information on request by law enforcement **regardless of survivor consent**. The National Human Trafficking Hotline has been operated since 2007 by the Polaris Project, a non-profit, non-governmental organization. According to the Polaris Project, the purpose of the hotline is to "connect human trafficking victims and survivors to critical support and services to get help and stay safe" in an **anonymous** fashion. Traffickers often threaten victims and their families if someone calls law enforcement, and this mandated disclosure poses a threat to **the safety and security of victims and survivors of human trafficking as well as to their trust, confidentiality, and autonomy.** Historically, the hotline has also been a resource for healthcare professionals to contact to learn what services can be offered to their patients and ask for general advice. This Act will eliminate an essential resource for communities, including survivors and service providers, across the country, especially in resource-limited areas.

As members of AMWA-PATH, we oppose policy that may inherently harm survivors of human trafficking; we are an organization that stands behind survivors We do not believe that this Act portrays survivor-centered legislation, and we therefore urge you to reconsider. Most survivors would not feel comfortable contacting the National Human Trafficking Hotline if they knew that the information they disclosed would be reported to law enforcement directly. Not every survivor is ready to report to law enforcement, for various reasons. **Although reporting to** law enforcement can be a vital part of a survivor's journey, it should NEVER be coerced. **Empowering and supporting victims and survivors requires a survivor-centered model where we prioritize their needs and allow them to make informed choices about participating in prosecution.** Mandating the National Human Trafficking Hotline to disclose information related to a survivor may endanger survivors or others by doing so. This Act takes away autonomy, choice, and forces individuals and providers into reporting. This may in-turn lead to decreased disclosure and presentation for needed services, and will risk decreased cooperation with a law enforcement.

Our collaborators with lived experience of human trafficking have provided the following expert opinions for your consideration:

"Anonymity is critical for a survivors' safety – it makes or breaks the trust they have with a system who is mandated to provide services. The proposed requirement to disclose information directly to a law enforcement body without the possibility of first allowing an individual to be educated on the services they may be eligible for inherently takes us a step back from our efforts to build equity in allowing a survivor to hold agency in their case. Instead, a survivor's healing journey is stifled for the betterment of achieving one form of justice. This in no way is intended to undermine the significance of law

enforcement's role in creating safety for our communities. Instead, the opposition to the proposed policy is to help educate proponents of the bill that changing the Hotline's intended purpose may further distance law enforcement's goal of building cooperation with a survivor who may serve as a witness to a case. Thus, we are recommending against passing the National Human Trafficking Hotline Enhancement Act (HR 2601)." – Field Expert, Human Trafficking

"As a survivor, I ask you to please consider the survivor and their families safety. Many survivors fear coming forward and reporting to law enforcement directly, due to threats, punishments and physical safety. Traffickers often use the survivors family to exact revenge and if the family are overseas or if the trafficker has their children, it can be dangerous to cooperate. Historically, the hotline has given the survivor community a safe place to report situations anonymously on their own terms, when it is safest to do so. Survivors have had many freedoms taken from them by traffickers, sometimes for years and even decades. Allowing them to keep their autonomy and report when they are ready, helps to restore some of that loss of freedom. I urge you to think from this perspective, and to consider what an impact can be made when justice stands on the side of the survivor"- Jennifer Hammer

AMWA-PATH stands against H.R. 2601, and we urge members of Congress to listen to survivors and vote NO.

If you would like to learn more, join our leadership team of volunteer medical students and physicians, arrange training, or donate to help fund our anti-trafficking efforts in education, advocacy, education and research, please visit www.amwa-doc.org/ourwork/initiatives/human-trafficking.

Thank You,

AMWA-PATH Advocacy Committee

American Medical Women's Association - Physicians Against the Trafficking of Humans